



If Betty White Were a Green Building...

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Photo by Alan Light

Perhaps you've heard the idea that "the greenest building is the one already built." Our friends in the historic preservation movement use this phrase to argue that tearing down an existing building and starting from scratch wastes a lot of materials and energy. And they have a point: A [recent report](#) from the National Trust for Historic Preservation concludes that it can take up to 80 years to make up for the environmental impacts of demolishing the old building and constructing the new one, even if the new one is super energy efficient.

So, granted, in most cases it's better to keep a building than to build a new one, but let's think about that creed again: The greenest building is the one already built. What if you're not planning a new building? Does that mean your existing building is already green? Does the mere fact that something already exists mean that it exhibits certain qualities? Does the fact that you were born mean that you live a healthy, prosperous and generous life? One can argue that our experiences and aspirations say substantially more about who we are than our DNA ever will. The same holds true for buildings.

Let's face it; LEED was conceived because there are a bunch of really bad buildings out there. They use too much energy and water, and make people sick. But the solution isn't to just tear them down and start over. Existing buildings, and in particular historic buildings, tell valuable stories. They've been worked in, lived in, and loved in. They teach us about our past and form the bedrock of our communities. But just like your wise but slightly behind-the-times grandfather who doesn't quite get what those new-fangled CFLs and LEDs are all about, sometimes we need to drag those old buildings, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century.

That's what [LEED for Existing Buildings](#) is all about. It provides a framework for measuring building performance, setting goals, implementing effective strategies and improving over time. It recognizes that a building's DNA is important, but that the ways in which it is operated and maintained tell a truer story of sustainability.

Historic buildings are already halfway there. Most of them were built before air conditioning was standard and everyone owned a car; Back when passive ventilation, thermal mass, and access to public transportation were de rigueur. Restoring original features, like unsealing those once-operable windows, can go a long way toward achieving high performance. And we can learn a lot from these elders in the process.

LEED seeks to pull them further with contemporary best practices like water-efficient plumbing fixtures, integrated pest management and retrocommissioning the HVAC systems. By applying the best science of today in the best buildings of our past to solve the crises of tomorrow, [LEED for Existing Buildings](#) is bringing the past into the future.

Many fantastic historic buildings have been certified with LEED for Existing Buildings, such as the [U.S. Treasury Building](#) in Washington, DC (built in 1842), the Wrigley Building in Chicago (1920) and the [Empire State Building](#) (1931). One of the more remarkable projects currently underway is the greening of the [Haas-Lilienthal House](#) in San Francisco. Owned by San Francisco Architectural Heritage, this Queen Anne-style Victorian house museum built in 1886 recently conducted an eco-charette and has adopted a sustainability management plan with an ambitious goal of Gold or better using LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance.

When most people think about green buildings, they picture a shiny new building with a green roof and solar panels, but if Betty White can host Saturday Night Live at 88, and Faluja Singh can run a marathon at the ripe old age of 100, what's stopping a Richardsonian Romanesque library or a Queen Anne house museum

from becoming the next star of the green building movement?

Christopher will be discussing the connections between sustainability and historic preservation with other industry experts at this week's AIA 2012 National Convention in Washington, DC. You can find them on Friday at 2 p.m. in session FR210: "From House Museums to the Empire State Building: Greening What's Already Here with LEED EB: O&M"



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