Green building boom at Turner Construction

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Marc Gunther
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If you doubt that green buildings are a very big deal, talk to Michael Deane.

Michael is chief sustainability officer at Turner Construction, one of the biggest construction companies in the U.S. Turner has completed almost 200 LEED-certified projects valued at $10.5 billion and the company has another 230 LEED registered projects valued $16.5 billion in progress. The New York-based firm employs more than 1,200 . LEED-accredited professionals, more than any other organization.

"The only excuse for not building a LEED building is ignorance," Michael told me when we met last week in Washington.

Here's a look at a Turner project, a health services building at Yale University.

LEED, of course, is Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and it may be the single biggest success story in the world of green business. With very little help from Washington (but considerable support from cities and states), the voluntary LEED standards for buildings have been embraced by architects, construction firms and their customers since they were introduced by the U.S. Green Building Council back in 2000. Many customers now insist on LEED. Said Michael: "It is totally a demand-driven phenomenon."

Michael took an unusual route into the construction industry. A native New Yorker, he went to college at the University of Colorado, thought about becoming an architect and ended up winning a scholarship to the Joffrey Ballet school. He became a member of the Paul Taylor Dance Company and performed on Broadway before hanging up his ballet shoes. "I hit 35. I saw where the career was going. I saw where my body was going. It was time to grow up," he said.

He went back to school, earning a master's in historic preservation from Columbia, and worked for a time for the city of New York and its public libraries. He joined a construction firm called Bovis, and moved to Turner in 2004 after hearing that the company saw the green-building trend as a growth opportunity.

"Turner's decision to get involved in green buildings was a business decision, based on market research," he told me. "It wasn't because our CEO was a treehugger."

It has paid off in a big way. Green building represented 17% of sales for Turner in 2005; it grew to 46% in 2010. The firm completed $1.3 billion of green work in 2006, $1.8B in 2007, $3.0B in 2008, $3.6B in 2009 and $4.2B in 2010. The work is spread across education, health care, government and commercial buildings.

"What other segment of the market has improved, year by year, by hundreds of millions of dollars?" Michael asks.

The most surprising thing that I learned from our conversation is that the cost premium associated with green buildings has all but disappeared. "Experience equals lower costs," he said. "Starting from a blank page, you can build a green building for the same or less."

As for the benefits, LEED-certified buildings are designed to use less energy although it doesn't always work out that way. More important, says Michael, they are pleasant spaces in which to work, learn or recuperate. "Patients heal more quickly in green hospitals," he says. "We're all hung up about carbon and energy efficiency, but I think the most important thing about green buildings is the quality of the environment we create."

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