Director's Corner: Making Green Schools an International Conversation

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Last month, I had the incredible opportunity to travel to Beijing, China for the 8th International Conference on Green & Energy Efficient Building to discuss the green schools movement. Although there are so many implicit differences between the U.S. and China – the language and culture are incredibly diverse from ours – I tested my assumption that healthy, high performing kids are a universal value that requires no translation.

At last year's conference, USGBC's President, CEO and Founding Chair Rick Fedrizzi issued a call to Chinese developers and builders to make a commitment to build their new schools green. The chairman of Franshion Properties, a major real estate developer, was so inspired by what Rick had to say that he committed that the two new schools Franshion was slated to build in the coming year, would be amongst the greenest schools in China and pursue both Three Star (the China Ministry of Construction's green building standard) and LEED on the spot.

The first of the two schools will open in August, and is on track to achieve LEED Platinum certification. I got a private tour of the school construction site from a group of project team members, including the architects, the LEED consultant and the head of the development project within which the school will reside. The school boasts ample daylighting in every classroom, a green roof, and power from a massive geothermal system (the largest in all of China) that will power the school and at least 17 other high-rise buildings. For the record, if I had known I was going to be teetering on wooden planks and half finished stairs, I would have chose different shoes.

The coolest experience I had in China happened on the last day of my trip, when I had a chance to do some sight-seeing. I explored 798 art zone – a community eight miles outside of City Center for contemporary artists built on a 50-year old former campus of military factories and warehouses. I was standing outside of one of the many galleries and through the glass spotted a flash of bright green. It took me a minute to realize that what had drawn my eye was a young woman wearing one of the green apple pins that I had come to China bearing as gifts. In a city as vast as Beijing, here was evidence that the green schools message was already being spread. Apparently word (and pins) travel fast in China.

To continue my world adventures, I was lucky enough to travel to Indonesia, to visit the Green School in Bali and announce it as the Center for Green School's "2012 Greenest School on Earth." The Green School is truly an incredible place – it has structures made from environmentally friendly bamboo, solar energy and vortex hydro technology projects to remove the school off the grid, bio-intensive farming to raise organic food, and so much more. The school was created by famous jeweler John Hardy, and gave me an entirely new perspective on how the green schools movement is growing internationally. I was truly honored to be able to visit the Green School, and it is clear the students and staff there have a true appreciation of our earth's beauty.

Overall, my travels in both China and Bali were incredibly well received, and I'm certain the Center for Green Schools and USGBC can work together with these countries to advance a shared vision of educational environments where children can thrive and prepare themselves to play a leading role in the emerging green economy.

Thanks for a great start to 2012, and I look forward to many more travels and adventures in the months to come.

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