



Fact Check with USGBC's Brendan Owens: USA Today

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Written by **Brendan Owens**

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There's a lot not to like about the *USA Today* articles written by Thomas Frank and posted earlier this week. To be fair however, there is some to like as well. And, just to put it out there, my list of things that could be better in [LEED](#) is a whole lot longer than Tom's - trying to fix them is why I work here.

A friend and colleague, who's much smarter than me, once told me that you never get into an argument with someone who buys ink by the barrel. But, there's one particular aspect of the article which is flat out untrue and insofar as it serves as a lead in to some of the larger points Tom has tried to make in the article, I feel compelled to address it directly.

In Tom's article he asserts that USGBC "sidestepped its own policy and allowed smoking in the Palazzo Casino." This is not true. We didn't sidestep an existing rule for Palazzo.

In the couple of times I spoke to Tom while he was researching his piece on USGBC and LEED, we spent considerable time on the subject of LEED-certified casino properties. Here's what I attempted to convey to Tom:

The Palazzo was awarded LEED certification in March 2008. Projects the size and scope of the Palazzo (of which there aren't many) take time to design and build. Our records indicate that the Palazzo project registered its intent to seek LEED certification in November 2006 and I recall conversations with the project team about the feasibility of a project like the Palazzo achieving LEED certification as early as 2004. In 2004, we had about 200 LEED certified projects. It's an understatement to say that the project like Palazzo was unusual when compared to the "typical" LEED project of the time. Having never conceived of a project as complex as the Palazzo (or the Pentagon, or a data center, or a hospital, or a laboratory) using LEED when LEED was initially written, and out of a desire to ensure that we didn't burden the administration of LEED with a regulatory mindset absent any compelling reason to do so, project boundary definitions were left to the discretion of the project team.

When the Palazzo project team proposed a project boundary definition that essentially divided the project into three separate buildings and drew the project boundary so that it excluded the casino floor from the project, we didn't have a policy that prohibited the team from doing this. We did take, what at the time were, extraordinary steps to ensure that the separate ventilation systems would ensure no cross contamination between the LEED-certified and uncertified portions of the complex. But there was no policy to "sidestep." I don't think that this is just a semantic difference but I do acknowledge that it's arguable that the spirit of LEED was somehow compromised. In hindsight maybe it was, but keep reading.

In fairness to Tom's coverage of the Palazzo certification, he does correctly state that, with the establishment of Minimum Program Requirements that were created based on the successes and failures of the way LEED had been used and abused, we no longer allow project teams to define project boundaries the way the Palazzo did in 2004. We weighed the pros and cons of not having a rule to prevent this type of activity, decided the cons outweighed the pros and prohibited this type of project boundary definition. The system learned, as it has on a thousand different issues over the 12 years it's been in the market, and it is, in my opinion, better for it.

Looping back around on the spirit of LEED - I think the fact that we learned from this project and thousands like it, is a strength, not a weakness.

LEED's not perfect, it never will be, but it will always be dynamic and, at least I hope, we're not going to build it to be unnecessarily restrictive. Flexibility encourages innovators to innovate and as a result creativity in LEED projects flourishes. We learn valuable lessons on the way, some are more uncomfortable than others, but we learn and we move forward.



Brendan Owens
Chief of Engineering
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Member employees, USGBC staff

5 comments

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Josh Radoff
YR&G

2 years 13 weeks ago

I think Brendan does a great job explaining the problems with the article, as does Nadav Malin in his LEEDuser editorial. But there are a few more points to add to this discussion that may reflect the general public's misunderstanding of how LEED is supposed to work:

1. It's ok that you get points for seemingly no extra work. LEED isn't trying to, nor can it, evaluate what a project would have done in the absence of extra money, effort, or desire for recognition. In other words, LEED doesn't care if something is required by code in a given location, makes good business sense, doesn't cost anything, or would have been done because the market demands it. So if a downtown project (such as the hotel the USA Today article references that's located on the Las Vegas strip) gets points because it has transit access and is in a walkable location, and it would have had transit access and walkability with or without the influence of LEED, that is by design. It is objectively and measurably better than having a project located without transit access, so it is a reasonable measure of the project's sustainability attributes and that is what LEED is intending to measure.

Yes, some points may seem cheap and easy for certain projects (e.g. transit orientation and density), but the fact is that projects that have the attributes that earn them these points are measurably better than those built without them. There are Vegas casinos, one should note, that are out in the sprawl and entirely auto-dependent, and these projects don't get those "free" points for a good reason. The difference between projects with and without these attributes is significant.

2. LEED doesn't care what kind of building it is. LEED doesn't pass judgment on the programming of the building. So if you have a monstrous hotel with five heated swimming pools (as did the hotel in the USA Today article) or even a manufacturing facility that produces concentrated liquid evil (so long as it complies with local environmental laws), LEED is silent. It doesn't get into the business of deciding which buildings are good and which are bad. Doing so would be a nearly impossible moral line to draw and would turn into a political food fight that would derail and distract from the focus of LEED. All the LEED rating systems speak to are the design and construction aspects of whatever you were going to build anyway (or for EBOM, what you are operating and managing anyway). So if the Vegas hotel was planning to have five swimming pools, LEED simply measures the degree to which that hotel, which was going to happen anyway, has efficiently heated the swimming pools and has generally built to LEED standards in other areas. After all, no one is going to build more swimming pools than they were planning just so they can be solar heated to earn more LEED points.

This is a complicated issue, and one that merits debate, but USGBC has made a conscious and defensible argument, which is that it isn't the basic intent and program of the building that needs to be green; rather it is how that building is designed and constructed.

3. LEED has to balance not being too easy and not being too hard. The LEED rating systems have to walk a fine line between stringency and market transformation. It wants as many projects to be able to get in the door (you don't want the five hotel casino being inefficient and toxic in addition to having so many pools, right?), but it also can't be too easy to get certified, otherwise the label becomes watered down and meaningless. Therefore, the question of which measures are chosen to become prerequisites, and how difficult it is to earn 40 points for basic certification is a really challenging one. This is especially true when you consider that there are LEED projects in Portland and Alabama and Dubai, where codes, transit, density, climate, market expectations and available resources and incentives vary widely. And it reinforces the importance of the different levels of certification: there are meaningful differences between Certified, Silver, Gold, and Platinum projects.

As nearly anyone who works with LEED knows – and as Nadav points out, and as Brendan Owens articulately states in his post – there are plenty of improvements to make and plenty of contentious issues to grapple over with the LEED rating systems. Among the top of the frustrations are the cost and time associated with pursuing certification, issues in ensuring long term performance, and the customer service that could provide clarification to project teams. But as to the value that LEED brings to individual projects and to the market as a whole, there can't really be any doubt as to the transformative value it has had and continues to have around the world. I've never seen a building become worse because of LEED. They are usually better versions of themselves after going through the process. But one wonders if this point is simply less story-worthy than a few skeletons in the LEED closet.

Josh Radoff
Principal, YR&G



Kathryn West

Sustainability Consultant, Merrick & Company

2 years 17 weeks ago

thanks for taking time to respond to this article!



Ralph Bennett

Architect, Prof. Em., University of Maryland College Park - Capital Projects

2 years 18 weeks ago

Brendan - too defensive. Critics cherry pick (out of context) trivial, single point credits without coming close to explaining the whole system - too much trouble, not enough time. Energy conservation can get 19 points (I have no idea what the Las Vegas project got) - that is what credit balance is about.

I'm more concerned about the Montgomery County project which deserves its own rebuttal. The developers should be encouraged to explain both their added costs, and their energy savings. Otherwise it can look like a boondoggle.

Besides, knocking casinos is a social value - OK for USA Today, maybe, but not for GBC. LEED should rank building types for merit?

Ralph Bennett LEED AP BD&C
Bennett Frank McCarthy Architects



Anica Landreneau

Sustainable Design Leader, Consulting Director, HOK

2 years 18 weeks ago

As someone who has applied LEED to around 150-200 projects, I'd be the last person to say it's perfect, however what critics need to realize is a) all those strategies like low VOC paint and carpet that are deemed somehow worthless because they aren't expensive? They don't cost anything precisely because LEED gave them a market, drove an increase in demand which brought the price down, and b) yes, some of the early iterations of LEED may not have weighted energy, water or carbon emissions as heavily as we might wish, but I think a young USGBC can be forgiven for believing that anyone who adopted a *voluntary* green rating system was doing so to actually make a project greener, not trying to game the system into giving out the biggest prize for the least effort. The USGBC responded quickly to this issue, reweighting the rating system to put emphasis on the most impactful strategies. I don't know of any place *building codes* are so responsive so quickly.

It seems like the press has been having a field day eviscerating LEED, lately. Well, like many things in the world, there's only as much integrity in the system as we put into it. Everyone who uses LEED (or other green building programs) is responsible for maintaining the integrity of it, stewarding our projects and clients to a better place. Those who game the system might get a plaque for their efforts, but they won't realize the full value they should from building green. As I often tell clients and colleagues, as soon as we undermine the integrity of the rating system, we undermine the value of our investment.



Arnold Kee

Director, Continuing Education, Green Building Certification Institute

33 weeks 4 days ago

This is so well put!

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