

# The Road to Rio+20: Houston is a city leading by example

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When you think of Houston you might think of 10-gallon cowboy hats, Nasa and a terrific barbecue. But you might not necessarily think about green building and sustainability initiatives.

Houston has been employing several very impressive sustainability strategies to achieve the city's self-proclaimed goal of being the greenest city in the country. It was another great stop on our [Road to Rio+20 series of events](#) that focuses on exploring the role of cities and buildings in the green economy.

Last year, in partnership with the [World Business Council for Sustainable Development](#) and the UN Environment Programme, we launched the series as a way to foster local discussion about how [innovation](#) in the [built environment](#) can translate into a global movement for driving a green economy before the 20-year anniversary [Rio+20 conference](#) in June 2012.

Cities were a logical focus when you consider more than half the world's population lives in cities – and that will rise to 70% by 2030. In addition, our urban areas generate 80% of all greenhouse gases worldwide, 75% of all energy and 60% of all water use.

Cities are where our challenges are the most concentrated, but they're also home to some of our greatest opportunities. This dynamic is definitely found in Houston.

Houston is working to lead by example, already ranking fifth in the country for total square footage of LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) green buildings.

In 2007, the city created a dynamic partnership with the [Clinton Climate Initiative](#) and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership group to retro-fit its entire portfolio of nearly 300 buildings by 2014. The effort includes multiple technology partners, such as [Schneider Electric](#) and [Siemens](#). Ultimately, the programme will reduce the city's overall energy use by more than 30% and save millions of dollars per year in utility and maintenance costs.

The city also created an [Energy Efficiency Incentive Program](#) that awards financial support to private building owners who want to implement energy efficiency projects. As Annise Parker, Houston's mayor, explains: "It's the Houston way. We try to persuade. We try to incentivise. We try not to mandate."

Following that ethos, the city launched a [Green Office Challenge](#) that helps businesses realise energy reductions in building operations. More than 400 businesses have signed up for the competition and are already making real improvements.

In fact, buildings represent not just our largest opportunity to reduce energy, but the most cost-effective path for doing so. By demonstrating strong leadership, Houston continues to deliver green building benefits to its residents. The US Conference of Mayors recognised the city's achievement in 2011 with its mayors' [Climate Protection Award](#).

Clearly, Houston is a model for the Rio+20 conference this June, but the city also exemplifies the type of leadership we want to facilitate through global action.

Next Stop on the Road to Rio+20: New York, Seattle and Washington, DC.

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