

In praise of LEED

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This article first appeared on [ArupConnect](#), the online magazine of Arup in the Americas. About the authors: Adam Friedberg is a senior consultant in Arup's New York office. Kirstin Weeks is a senior specialist in our San Francisco office.

After an unprecedented six public comment periods, the US Green Building Council (USGBC) membership has just adopted [the fourth version of its phenomenally popular rating system, LEED](#) (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). Arup has been a supporter of the program for many years, working on LEED projects since the version 1 pilot in 2001 (and, in many cases, achieving the [highest possible certification](#)).

To celebrate the release of the new version, we took a few moments to consider the program's impact on our work over the years — and why we continue to recommend it to most of our clients.

Popularizing green

LEED's name recognition is perhaps its greatest asset. It has created a shorthand reference that allows clients, designers, and the general public to describe buildings' sustainable attributes in a way that is broadly understood and appreciated.

The system's popularity has made the conversation about sustainability deeper, more rigorous, and more interesting. Thanks to LEED, the baseline awareness of the broad range of factors influencing building sustainability has ballooned over the last decade. "Looking back to the days before LEED, it was easy for buildings to claim green credentials even when they were barely clearing code standards," [Arup principal and USGBC board member Fiona Cousins](#) said. LEED has been fantastic as a means for both promoting sustainability and reducing greenwash.

Its extensive market penetration has also made it a valuable commodity for property owners. Due to its name recognition even among people outside of the design field, LEED certification helps attract tenants and often increases property values. Because its value is well understood and generally predictable, clients are able to justify the money and effort needed to achieve the benchmark.

Policymakers have been paying attention as well. Many municipal and state building codes have moved towards the system, with cities like [Boston requiring LEED-certifiable projects](#). It has also become a blueprint for mandatory standards such as California's [CALGreen](#). Its similarity to rating systems such as [BREEAM](#) gives it additional international credibility.

Many of our clients like to use the standard to understand what is expected of them in a particular market — for example, LEED certification is practically a prerequisite for class A office space in San Francisco. It also helps developers, owners, and property managers understand what their assets will need to look like to remain attractive to the market in the future.

Motivating and enabling a broad range of clients

LEED is a simple, effective tool for communicating with clients and encouraging specific sustainable design actions across a broad spectrum of impacts. "Over the years I've found that for many clients it's simpler to buy, for example, a sustainable energy measure with the reward of getting points towards Gold than to be convinced of the CO₂ savings," said Ramon Rodriguez, who heads the sustainability and energy practice in Arup's Madrid office.

The program caters to both those with deep green ambitions and those who are just starting out. By establishing metrics, standardizing performance, and setting up a common understanding of what sustainability in the built environment means, it provides a simple point of entry even for clients who rarely build. Although it requires a minimum level of performance across the whole spectrum of environmental sustainability, it offers many paths to certification,

allowing different clients and design teams to pick those most relevant to their needs and ambitions. Experienced clients who are committed to sustainability tend to use it as a jumping-off point to seek ever-higher levels of performance, while those with less knowledge simply use it as a road map to help them ensure quality in their buildings.

Its breadth also helps create awareness across the design industry. While some parts of the market have traditionally been very aware of the benefits of reducing energy, for example, the LEED system encourages all participants to recognize the benefits of other sustainability measures, such as improved internal air quality, daylighting levels, and water efficiency.

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