

## “Lead or follow LEED? – definitive elegance in green building design”

NESEA Building Energy Conference – 2003

**Bruce Coldham**, Coldham&Hartman Architects  
**Paul Stoller**, Atelier Ten

The USGBC ‘LEED’ program has achieved considerable success in stimulating the adoption of green building practices — 3% of commercial buildings (by area) are registered in the LEED program at the beginning of this year, and it has established a sound basis for evaluating comprehensive performance in this arena. These are two notable achievements.

But from a design standpoint, LEED is a little like “painting-by-numbers”. Whereas LEED delivers on market stimulation and performance evaluation, it is never clear whether investment has been optimized — whether it might not have been better to concentrate design effort on a few rich opportunities, rather than spreading the effort evenly over the whole spectrum of possibility.

There is already an established tendency among architects and the architectural media in the U.S. to approach green design as a “box checking” exercise — architects and particularly architectural journalists, critics, commentators, etc. discuss and evaluate the *quantitatively* by the number of specific strategies implemented across the full spectrum of design possibility - rather than *qualitatively* by evaluating the site, the program and other specific and unique opportunities associated with a particular project, which, in turn, reveal a handful of especially formative (and green) design strategies.

Consider a baseball analogy — (daring and dangerous for Australians but let’s try). A successful hitter in baseball lets balls pass, looking for the best opportunity to strike and thereby maximizes the likelihood of achieving a homerun. A “homerun”, in this case, is an elegant integration of the opportunities for resourceful design.

So long as the profession, the press, and the public consider ecological design and high performing green buildings as a catalogue of features, rather than a focused synthesis of unique and powerful drivers, the green building challenge will be one of accounting rather than of design. Architects with real talent will continue to be diverted to the wasteland of deconstructed fantasies (with very short half-lives), and architecture and the environment will be the poorer.

The pursuit of green-ness — an architecture which is both fitting and reflective of natural processes and the flow of energy — should profoundly influence the image of buildings and the built environment. What a rich set of opportunities. But still the design profession has been slow to respond.

This session, therefore, aims to reveal "good, green design" as an aesthetic, creative enterprise rather than an accounting enterprise. The session will use European building project examples where this qualitative approach is more established — as well as U.S. projects, as case studies for both the yin and the yang.

Questions for consideration:

For a limited design budget, is a broad sweep of LEED the best way to achieve high performance? In what situations is the answer likely to be positive ... or negative

Evaluate one or two of Paul's and/or Bruce's successful buildings using LEED criteria. How do they do?

The integration of natural processes — the ambient energy and nutrient flows — with building operations would seem to be an extremely fertile realm for formal architectural innovation. Why is the design profession so slow to become inspired? Why are design professionals so excited by the formal properties of buildings that look as though they have been in an earthquake?