

Sustainability: You've got to live the life!
By Tom Paladino, President, Paladino and Company

While it was thrilling to hear Rick Fedrizzi, President of the USGBC, announce at Greenbuild 2006 that the Council has set a goal to certify a massive 100,000 buildings by 2010, it left me wondering what that implies for us all.

With 2000 LEED certified buildings to date and 30,000 LEED Accredited Professionals that means, in simple terms, there are about 28,000 LEED APs who haven't been able to do good yet. I wonder, what are they working on, or maybe, what are they working towards?

A lot of the push around green buildings has been about the building itself: the artifact, the object. If green buildings are so terrific, with 30,000 LEED APs out there, why aren't we producing them faster?

I wonder if there is too much focus on the artifact. The LEED scorecard works like a golf card - everyone is being pushed towards the win. It's not about changing the process as much as it is about getting the prize. But does the prize have real value if the artifact is only marginally better?

I have a hypothesis that the key to greater acceleration is to actually focus on what makes the thing, not the thing. For starters, that would be those 28,000 LEED APs that are missing in action.

What might allow them to create green buildings the way they hoped they would; to meet the climate challenge that threatens our way of life? If creating building artifacts with plaques on them is not enough, then what is?

Some of our current clients are beginning to answer that question. For instance, one of the largest REITs in America, considers green building a competitive differentiator. For them, it's not about the object, or the LEED plaque, it's about their ability to establish a leadership position by attracting the best tenants. The focus on position has led them to hire designers that can support a valid business proposition that places tenant experience at the center.

And others are looking at the end user experience from a green perspective. For example, if hotel rooms are easy to visit, affording an eco-centric lifestyle while on the road, connecting the adventure-seeking business traveler with the Internet, their exercise or spiritual routine, or even providing a moment of meditation, quiet or an experience with nature, the brand is going to attract guests willing to pay for that.

The point I'm trying to make is that people aren't excited about experiencing or creating a green artifact; they're really excited about experiencing and creating a green lifestyle. LEED is about the thing, and we need to get beyond the thing and get at the lifestyle.

We need to recognize that massive transformation is not going to happen by the top tier pushing ideas or mandates down to the masses, but more by grass-roots communities of individuals bringing the lifestyle up to a given level of awareness and authenticity.

So who is responsible for designing the lifestyle, not the artifact? My answer: we all are. Anyone who finances and develops a "green" building, touches its design and delivery, or lives or works in one, had better begin to live the life themselves if there is any hope for massive and rapid transformation to a sustainable economy.

It's like the scarcity and abundance idea I wrote about last year. 2,000 LEED buildings to date is a scarce thing. If we focus on sustainability as a life change, we can create abundance from the bottom up.

To start, what if we focus on the people who use the artifact and always, always start by answering the question: what gives them a more sustainable lifestyle? Put yourself in their shoes. Do you want more flexibility in your workday? Perhaps a more sustainable commute would give you more family time. A connection to nature while you work might make you more productive. A toxin free space means no medication for asthmatic attacks. Think lifestyle, not LEED scorecard.

If you create a building that affords a green lifestyle, embraces it, and celebrates it, I can guarantee the occupants will figure out how to operate it with the smallest carbon footprint possible! But if all you give people is a building that's frugal - and you don't change their behavior - you will get a building that slowly unwinds, degrades and devolves to the lowest common denominator in performance. Because frugality and scarcity never motivate people.

For example, what if a developer decides that every person in their new condo tower would use community cars and public transit as their primary mode of transportation? Some might argue that nobody would move in without a place for their car. On the other hand, if there is a \$30,000 reduction in the asking price, perhaps the project would sell out twice as fast.

So here's my suggestion for you to start with tomorrow: You must dream it before you can live it, and you must live it before you can create it for others. Can building owners and 30,000 LEED APs help deliver an end user experience that makes working, living in or visiting a green building meaningful? I think they can. Because if we're going to create that many artifacts by 2010, we have to be able to live the life ourselves!