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FACE OF THE AIA

Sustainability Is in the Details

Summary: Sustainability in architecture and building is a bona fide movement. What makes it different from most trends in architecture and design is that it's being fueled by clients of all stripes as well as by architects—not just by the avant-garde (typical of new design directions) but also by architects at every level of practice. Clients interested in sustainability come from all spectrums—government officials at every level, private and public institutions, corporate leaders, single clients looking to build a sustainable house. Compared to other movements in architecture over the past century or more, none has been more fully embraced by both architects and their clients, and none has had the potential to change radically the way we design and build.

Because of the widespread interest of clients in this arena, architects sometimes find themselves caught short about their approach to green design. Clients have been known to ask for new technologies, materials, and building systems about which their architects might have only casual knowledge. They might have never specified bamboo flooring, for example, or might not be as well versed in the intricacies of photovoltaic systems (PVs, for those in the know) as their clients appear to be. In some cases, clients are leading the architects (or pushing them, depending on your perspective) down the paths of sustainability. On the whole, this can be a plus for architecture. Clients can be more engaged in the process and more demanding about building performance. The result is architecture that is more in tune with the environment, less of a drain on our natural resources, and is a healthier built environment to live and work in.

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Buzz versus basics

The challenge for today's architects, however, is to make sure the client's priorities are straight and intelligent decisions are made. In our own practice, we've seen a trend for clients wanting to "do the right thing" in terms of sustainable architecture and latching onto fancy, high-profile technologies while overlooking the basics to good environmental design. For example, PVs are very hot right now (no pun intended). They're getting more attention among clients hoping to "get off the grid." "Geothermal" has become a buzz term for many green building fans. This technology draws upon the earth's own steady-state temperature below grade to pre-heat or pre-cool a medium such as water for HVAC systems. A few years ago, everyone wanted to use straw-bales.

The problem arises when clients get hooked on the buzz while ignoring some important basics:

- Does the building have the best exposure for installing a PV system?
- Are there other, more cost-effective ways to reduce the building's energy consumption?
- Can the building's square footage be reduced (one of the most sustainable moves you can make)?
- Can an existing building be adapted instead of constructing a new one?
- Are there ways to manage water runoff without resorting to a vegetated roof?

Clients who have caught the sustainability bug might not like this approach because it diverts their attention from some sexy, new technologies. But if they are really committed to green architecture, they'll want to make intelligent choices that can result in a more sustainable building without all the bells and whistles. It might not be "green chic," but it will be delivering on the promise of sustainable design and construction long after the buzz has died down.

With all this in mind, the goal of this monthly column on sustainable architecture is to help you talk to your clients, be aware of the appropriate options, weigh the possibilities, and make intelligent choices, all without making a full-time career out of wading through the mountains of data and seas of "green wash" that can scare anyone away from trying to design and build in harmony with the environment.