

# The Green Path To Collaboration

*Green Building Offers New Ways For  
Contractors, Designers To Create  
Durable Buildings By Working Together*

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If it's true that almost every challenge comes with an opportunity, why should green and high-performance buildings be any different? As a contractor involved in delivering buildings of all types, and especially interested in delivering high-performing green buildings, we see an opportunity to remake the relationship between designers and constructors in this brave new world.

For too long, architects and contractors have been mired in a world of distrust. Although understandable, it is always disruptive to the ultimate job at hand: delivering a quality building project to the owner. It will take a great deal of hard work to build trust between the traditionally separated worlds of design and construction, but the coming of integrated project delivery and integrated design at the same time as the growth of green, provides an opportunity to hit the reset button.

As designers and contractors, we are facing new and different sustainability challenges every day from every direction. The public-at-large is clamoring for it; government seems to think that legislating green is a good idea; owners of all types see the marketing value and, when done correctly, a building performance benefit; and finally, from within our own ranks, designer and contractor associations are actively engaging in sustainability or green programs.

All are focused more than ever on the various certification and standards-based programs such as LEED®, Green Globes™ and EPA's Energy Star, not to mention programs in the offing from ASHRAE, ICC and ASTM. All are gaining ever-wider acceptance and seek to set higher standards for the work we do.

For designers, the legal and technical challenges of sustainability have been widely discussed, but it is also important for designers to have a sense of the challenges contractors face and how they can be turned into opportunities.

Good contractors are crucial allies in delivering the best outcome for the owner. After all, they are on the front lines of realizing the collective intent of the design professional's and owner's wishes. That's where contractors can excel in their traditional roles of providing quality work, attending to detail, anticipating



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issues before they become problems and ensuring that problems are resolved at the appropriate level. Architects that develop and nurture relationships with highly-competent contractors, large and small, provide owners with a real benefit.

In a green, high-performance world, how can design professionals of all stripes create the basis for integrated project delivery? Most importantly, architects, engineers, contractors and sub-contractors should use green or high-performance buildings as the chance to change the traditional adversarial roles, providing a better bottom line for all involved. More and better information flowing between the parties regarding green issues can provide actual examples of a cooperative tenor that can set a tone for the project as a whole. Bridges have to begin somewhere and what better place than sustainability?

## KEEPING OUR OWN HOUSES IN ORDER

On green projects, we must all minimize the impact of our own methods and materials on the environment and adhere to standards and regulations that directly affect us. This is not new, but the opportunities for us to contribute to our sustainability goals on the projects we work on continue to increase when we look to our own practices first.

Just as design practice has been changing, contractors need to think proactively about the choices they make in their own business practices, as well as construction procedures and decisions. Looking closely at the design specifications that have sustainability implications is part of the designer's task, but when contractors are brought to the table early in the process, they can give some real-world guidance that could make implementing

sustainable practices easier. Design professionals can also actively engage contractors in discussing construction practices that may have negative consequences.

### GATHERING INTELLIGENCE

In general, both designers and contractors must develop a sound working knowledge of the meaning and goals, not only of the accreditation and certification programs that affect us, but also of the sustainability objectives of the specific projects on which we are engaged. Because the definition of green and high-performance construction is still being debated, staying current may require a bit of sleuthing and vigilance. But putting in the extra effort simply makes good business sense. This is especially the case since so much in this area is characterized by “puffery” of one kind or another. Design professionals and constructors can help each other in separating the wheat from the chaff of green building claims.

### DOING OUR HOMEWORK

The ambiguity surrounding standards is no excuse for less than our most conscientious efforts when it comes to the green or high-performance goals of a specific project at hand. Design professionals should request more information from green consultants to make sure they aren't just repeating marketing claims or poorly-researched conclusions. This is something architects and engineers are particularly well-positioned to do. For contractors, requesting copies of the contract documents, studying them carefully and asking questions or raising red flags up front, not only helps prevent problems later, but signals a concern with limiting future problems, a quality that should be valued and rewarded.

### UNDERSTANDING INNOVATION

As high-performance initiatives gain momentum, innovative projects and high-tech materials continue to come on line faster and in more forms. Specifying these products or materials requires special due diligence on the part of designers. Many are not time-tested, or lack track records in a specific application. As a baseline, contractors must ensure compliance with the manufacturer's warranty requirements for handling and installing these materials, so they perform properly and achieve their goals, both independently and as components within larger systems.

By developing a more in-depth understanding of material function, a contractor can make worthwhile assessments of overall systems integration issues that may have escaped notice on paper. In addition, supply and demand issues may affect availability and delivery of new products, which could impact schedules adversely if not taken into account up front. Both designers and contractors need to flag issues early and communicate effectively when such innovation is part of the project.

### STAYING AHEAD OF THE GAME

Knowledge and training have always been keys to success for both contractors and designers. In truth, competency is nothing other than the current knowledge possessed and the commitment to acquire the new knowledge needed to keep delivering a superior product or service. We should take advantage of the many opportunities afforded by manufacturers, suppliers, researchers and associations to fuel the integration of green into the new and existing building stock. Even more, we should take the opportunity

to analyze and learn from both the failures and successes in the green building arena.

### GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Contractors and designers can't assume that yesterday's best practices live up to today's more stringent requirements and expectations. For contractors, the rule of thumb must be to adhere to the “spirit,” as well as the “letter” of the specifications. For designers, the rule of thumb must be to understand and value the process of construction as a basic way of improving design function and elegance. As an example, accumulating the required points for the targeted level of a green rating certification can come down to a contractor's adherence to a more stringent set of best practices, which may be different on other projects. As legislation and regulation regarding green and energy efficiency penetrate deeper into the built environment, evolving best practices should be encouraged by both designers and contractors of themselves and each other.

### MANAGING NEW RISKS

Just as the standards and definitions for green and high-performance construction are being sorted out, so are the legal and liability issues. Like all issues involving standards, responsibility for failure has a trickledown effect. Diligence, best practices and open communication, as always, are the cornerstones of risk management in this new environment. Contractors and designers can help each other more clearly understand the implications of improper choices and risk transfer, which may not be obvious to those involved primarily in cheerleading for green.

### NOT BIGGER CHALLENGES...JUST DIFFERENT

The challenges and opportunities that come with our roles in green and high-performance construction are really no greater or more difficult to face than many others. They're just different. Designers and contractors can meet in the middle to help realistically manage the differences and add value.

Green building is here to stay. It can help drive better outcomes in building practice and performance. It may have a salutary side effect of starting a new dialogue between designers and contractors who help bring their visions to life.

## Did You Know...

The Builders Association is a proud charter member of the AGC of America, the nation's largest and most effective construction industry advocate. Since helping form the AGC in 1918, the Builders Association has been one of its most active chapters and has had three members serve as President of the national organization.

