

# GREEN edge

## THE GREEN IMPERATIVE

BY PETER RUMSEY, PE, CEM, AND JASON F. MCLENNAN, LEED AP

*“To tear at the web in such a massive way with so little regard for our own future is a kind of collective insanity that is suicidal.”*

– David Suzuki

In the last few years, green building has grown into its own “industry” replete with international organizations, conferences, trade publications, certification systems and so on. This is good, yet it can divert our attention from the links to the greater environmental problems we face.

So often project teams get caught up in the idea of chasing Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) points or specifying overt symbols of “greenness” to please their clients without reflecting on the true implications of the decisions to the broader environment. We get caught up in the paradigm of “doing less bad,” instead of focusing on strategies that won’t garner LEED points but will reduce our environmental footprint the most, e.g., designing smaller building or protecting biodiversity during construction.

Most of us in the green building movement care deeply about the environment and the plight of citizens all over the world, but often we are not as educated as we should be about the environmental issues

we champion. Without firm knowledge and a precautionary approach we are less effective and more easily lulled into accepting anything less than our best effort. Both of us also struggle with this challenge.

Much has changed since the first Earth Day in 1970, and not all for the worse. Standards of living have grown for billions worldwide. Citizen action, environmental policy and technological progress have resulted in cleaner air and water in the U.S. and Europe. Awareness is growing about the effects our civilization is having on the environment.

Yet overall trends are troubling. The global economy runs on fossil fuels and emits millions of tons of toxins annually. Each year there are more and more of us consuming more per capita than the year before, while billions struggle in poverty. The worldwide impact of everyday economic activity, largely invisible to most consumers, degrades every natural system and the rate of that decline keeps increasing. Tens of thousands of known species face likely extinction in coming years. These warning signs have gone largely unheard by world leaders and the majority of our fellow humans, for we have failed to make better choices and change direction.

*A constructed wetland is one of nine biomes represented within the landscape of Missouri Department of Conservation Discovery Center in Kansas City, which is intended to teach urban dwellers about their state wildlife. Courtesy BNIM Architects, photo credit: © 2002 Assassi Productions.*



We feel a sense of loss for our children who will never experience the relative ecological abundance that we had in our youth. We want to do something about it.

The environment is not shaped by our motives, but rather by our actions. This imperative is not about saving postcard vistas and cute mammals. It is about preserving the imperiled resilience and productivity of the natural systems upon which all humanity — indeed, all life — depend. Science tells us that we are the cause of our planet’s sixth great wave of rapid global extinction, like meteors that befell the dinosaurs. The Earth will regenerate, as it has many times before, but over many thousands of years — too slowly to mean much to scores of impoverished generations to come.

This is why we need to do what we can as an industry to change the underlying systems that harm the health of the biosphere. This requires that we look beyond our professions and outside our buildings to related aspects of our global society and economy. We need to raise our vehicles’ average fuel economy and make public transportation viable, to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy, and to eliminate materials that create toxic by-products.

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Environmental health can't depend on saintly behavior, because we are too busy, flawed and human to be perfect. Paul Hawken summed it up in the Ecology of Commerce when he said, "Doing the right thing must be as simple as falling off a log."

We are not all doom and gloom. Guilt is a poor motivator. Mother Nature inspires and invigorates us with her beauty and brilliance. She has much to teach us about effective design, resilient complex systems, renewable resources, high-performance materials, and balancing competition and cooperation. As we enter the second half of this decade – our last chance to begin the strategic transition to sustainability, many argue – it is vital for us all to ground ourselves firmly in the fundamental reasons why we need to go green.

The decline of any movement can be discerned when its advocates begin fighting harder to protect the ground it has gained than to break new ground, and when people work harder for their organization than for their organization's cause. We must not idolize the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) and allow it to become complacent, but push the organization to do more for the environment. We must continue to raise the bar and create truly restorative buildings. We need to push the USGBC to grow its standards and go beyond Platinum.

We feel very fortunate to be involved in the green building industry. Yes, it produces better buildings, saves energy, and fosters healthier, more productive employees. Yes, it attracts tenants and holds property value longer. But primarily we do this because it is better for the environment that nurtures our bodies and souls, and thus better for us as well. ☺



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