

# From Green Building to Living Buildings

by Dennis Wilde

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When Gerding Edlen Development began to focus on green building 10 years ago, many of our peers thought we were wasting money and time — that sustainable development was a fad with little chance of being profitable.

We had a different view, believing we could create buildings that retain their value, conserve resources, are more hospitable to their residents, and have less impact on the earth.

Today, 39 LEED projects later, our once revolutionary vision is becoming standard, and many of the early naysayers now see sustainable development as a smart business decision. We continue to push for buildings and neighborhoods that not only conserve but also generate resources, and know that collaboration with our peers is the best way for all of us to advance sustainable development.

For so long, LEED has defined green building and set a great standard, giving us the language and establishing the guidelines that got us all on the same page. But to truly impact our collective carbon footprint and reduce our use of natural resources, our building habits must change even more.

At Gerding Edlen, we now use a measure called the Livable Place Index, which measures a project's impact on people, profit and planet. Our definition of green building has expanded to include 20-minute living and sustainable neighborhoods that enrich lives by incorporating mass transit, retail and housing, green spaces and public art, innovative energy and water solutions, and even greener lifestyle options. Cyan/PDX in Portland, Ore., is a great example (visit [www.cyanpdx.com](http://www.cyanpdx.com)). A full host of green building features will shrink its carbon footprint, but what really adds to its appeal are its proximity to streetcar, bus, light rail and bike routes, and small-scale homes that encourage residents to live more efficiently and use city amenities as an extension of their home.

As we continue to explore and refine the possibilities before us, several things are becoming clear. We must push for and use even more sustainable materials so they become more affordable and available — even standard — for the entire building industry. Strategies such as public policy change and public-private partnerships are essential to helping us move beyond the status quo.

And we must create “living buildings,” meaning buildings that generate all of their own energy with renewable resources, capture and treat all of their water, and operate efficiently and for maximum beauty. The Cascadia Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council has challenged developers and builders to meet the standards of a living building, considering the site, energy, materials, water, indoor air quality, plus beauty and inspiration. As we move beyond LEED Platinum, we must ensure that our buildings are not only easy on the environment, but also an asset to community, enhancing the lives of all who interact with them.

The future is buildings that produce more energy than they consume, and consume more waste than they generate. We’ve seen important steps toward this as more builders use on-site solar panels, wind turbines and even membrane bioreactors, and it’s an area we need to continue developing. We are looking at solid-waste processing and mining sewers for residual heat as future possibilities.

If we look at green building less as a planning and construction technique, and more as a vision for a place that will thrive — economically, socially and environmentally — it will become a community asset far more valuable than its balance sheet. It can enhance city services, spark creation of retail and cultural gathering places, connect people with public transit and shared open space — and do it all with a tiny or even positive footprint at a cost comparable to conventional building.

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