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The Biggest NeoCon Thrill

By Keri Luly, LEED AP

One landmark Chicago building is taking steps necessary to achieve LEED certification.

As a NeoCon® neophyte, I was looking forward to seeing how far 'green' had actually infiltrated into the contract design industry's major event of the year. It was a thrill to see how many seminars at NeoCon had a sustainability focus-but that wasn't the biggest thrill. It was satisfying to see how many green products were being showcased at NeoCon-but that wasn't the biggest thrill either. I was glad to see a number of green publications and articles in other publications at NeoCon-but that also wasn't the biggest thrill. I was very happy to see some environmental groups (USGBC and others) participating at NeoCon (even though finding them way back against a wall on the eighth floor was quite a challenge), but even that wasn't it.

So what was the biggest green thrill at NeoCon this year? It got surprisingly little attention, but (drum roll, please)-The Merchandise Mart is going for LEED® certification! Now that is a thrill of serious magnitude.

Granted, The Merchandise Mart isn't "at" NeoCon, it's the other way around, but it's been the only home to NeoCon for its 39-year history. A twist of fate in NeoCon's first year-McCormick Place burned down-brought the event to the building where it has thrived ever since. I also learned (finally) that "NeoCon" stands for National Exposition of Contract Furnishings, a usage far ahead of its current political use.

Myron Maurer, senior vice president of Merchandise Mart Properties Inc. (MMPI), announced the decision to pursue certification to LEED for Existing Buildings (LEED-EB) at the Delta Institute's Partners for Change event during NeoCon. When I later asked him what he thought would be the biggest challenge of seeking LEED certification, his immediate response was that "it's a humongous building!"-an understatement if I ever heard one. The Merchandise Mart, when completed in 1931, was the largest building in the world. And at more than four million square feet, it is still the largest commercial building in the world. 'Humongous' hardly covers it in terms of the sheer magnitude of the project they're taking on, or the environmental impact their work will have. That's why their announcement was the biggest thrill of NeoCon.

You might think that since there is a rapidly growing number of LEED projects out there, maybe this one isn't that big a deal. Wrong. The Mart project is going to present a very significant impact on the green building world and environment for several reasons.

It truly is a humongous building, full of people. As Maurer continued to explain, the sheer volume of fixtures alone is amazing so water efficiency and energy conservation will be major undertakings with an impact on the environment.

LEED-EB is different from the other LEED rating systems in that it is the beginning of a continuing process for the life of the building; not an end-goal rewarding an accomplishment. LEED-EB is relatively new so there aren't as many experts and the learning curve is still high.

Obtaining certification isn't a project for the building's management alone, it's a project for everyone who occupies that space, cleans it, displays in it, eats in it, sells in it, welcomes clients to it, comes and goes from it, or attends or holds events in it. Teaching all those people how to do what they do in a more environmentally sensitive manner will be more challenging than in most projects, and, as Mark Bettin, national director of engineering, commented, you can't just get them all in one room to tell them what they need to know. It's not easy to change peoples' habits and even harder when the people are so varied in their roles and backgrounds. That's compounded by a fast schedule with certification sought by November of 2007 and the usual



number of shows continuing to be planned and carried out. Educating building users to change their behaviors will be a job in proportion to the project: humongous.

Just think for a moment about the amount of waste that is generated by the tenants and visitors to a building that size on a normal (however you would define normal) day, with the delivery of all the goods to be displayed and all the corrugated packaging wrapped around them. Then think about the additional tons added by NeoCon and the other 300 or so events held there annually. Waste reduction and recycling are only two of the components of LEED-EB. There is much, much more involved in getting certified.

Next, think about the Mart's energy consumption under those same normal and extraordinary conditions. Mind-boggling.

Fortunately, the Mart isn't new to environmental improvements, and they have excellent advisors. Elise Zelechowski, a LEED Accredited Professional at the Delta Institute in Chicago, has valuable experience with LEED projects. Delta, celebrating its ninth birthday as a community organization combining environment with economic development, is savvy in identifying potential technical options and funding sources for the project. Sadhu Johnson, chief of Chicago's Department of Environment (which has set its sights on being the greenest city in the United States) is also working with the Mart, encouraging the use of solar energy for the building.

Considering my own background in working to help organizations recognize the business value of environmental improvement, it was also a thrill to hear Maurer say that the Mart initially began some green changes a few years ago because it made business sense. There's no denying that cutting waste and reducing energy and water use is smart for everyone, including a building like The Merchandise Mart. The Mart recycled 60 percent of its waste stream in 2006 and started recycling 15 years ago. They switched to Green Seal paints and low-VOC cleaning methods; reducing VOC pollution by 264,018 pounds in 2006. That's no small feat since it continues to be the largest reduction by a commercial office building to date. Lower VOCs means a healthier work environment, which is definitely wise for business since it translates to fewer employee sick days.

I hope that by next year's NeoCon, there will be many more thrills to discuss since part of this project will include adopting green events guidelines. Additional strategies to be implemented include:

- an expanded recycling program
- a green purchasing policy
- a green cleaning policy
- a green site maintenance program that includes drought resistant plantings and integrated pest management to avoid pesticide pollution
- updated construction standards
- solar panels for hot water, upper floor heating, and (possibly) cooling in the summer
- under evaluation, a green roof, including one on the highly visible Apparel Center building across the street

I'm looking forward to being thrilled in November, when attainment of LEED certification is planned and Greenbuild will be in town. And I'll look forward to NeoCon 2008 and touring with a green eye toward improvements in a humongous Chicago landmark proudly bearing a LEED plaque.



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DONATION

Keri Luly has elected to donate her monetary compensation for the articles she writes to an environmentally pro-active organization of her choosing. This issue, she has selected The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). The Natural Resources Defense Council's purpose is to safeguard the Earth: its people, its plants and animals and the natural systems on which all life depends. They work to restore the integrity of the elements that sustain life-air, land and water-and to defend endangered natural places. They seek to establish sustainability and good stewardship of the Earth as central ethical imperatives of human society and protect nature in ways that advance the long-term welfare of present and future generations.

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