

Environmental Stewardship and Social Responsibility We Can Do it All

by Donald I. King, FAIA

Green Design and Social Equity: Eco-Consciousness and the Selling of Green Design

For many of us who have worked in low-income communities for decades, combining green building applications with a concern for economic and social equity is a logical next step. However, most members of underserved populations are not as environmentally aware as we might want them to be. Until recently, these groups were excluded from the movement of green design and construction. Sustainable design was not widely embraced among low-income communities because of the misconception that it is more expensive and certification, as the promoted measure of a successful green project, difficult to achieve.

This sentiment was exploited during the recent Seattle plastic shopping bag so called tax initiative. The idea that a disincentive to reduce the demand for the grocery store plastic bags was touted in minority communities as a “regressive” tax disproportionately impacting poor neighborhoods. The tactic worked and the initiative was defeated. For those familiar with the social dynamics prior to this campaign, it was not a surprise. Support of green initiatives is vastly different between upper income neighborhoods and lower income neighborhoods of color. The defeat, albeit less relevant to the sustainable design issues, serves as a great example of the challenges ahead of us. The environmental movement has excluded a large part of the population from its mission leaving its opponents to set the discussion of its merits and relevance in these excluded communities.

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) methodology, although of great benefit, has been so dominant in our design and construction industry that for many it is considered the only measurable standard. The elite accreditation credentials and

costly certification process often discourage using some high impact and affordable green actions.

In this advocacy period of the eco-economy, we are seeing the first widespread coupling of green techniques with new employment opportunities. As socially-conscious architects, we need to take the lead in advancing the Green for All © cause by advising our clients of the cost benefits of projects that are affordable to build and easy to maintain, that pass on economic and environmental advantages to the end-users, and that contribute to the proliferation of green-collar jobs.

Demystifying the rewards of a green economy for low-income populations is key to their inclusion. Plain talk and tangible success promotes the idea that “green for all” is good for all. Higher pollution exposure in low-income neighborhoods, resource-wasting facilities, and higher energy costs disproportionately burden the poor. The social inequity of our polluting and wasteful society can be seen in the higher volume of environmentally-based health problems and dysfunctional buildings with high utility costs in underprivileged communities.

We can begin to solve a multitude of our biggest social challenges with green approaches since our buildings impact everyone. As designers of the built environment, we need to step up our commitment to improve the quality of life for all people; we need to make every effort to show the larger community the possibilities and payoffs that result from an environmentally responsible approach. We should champion the idea of how an environmentally conscious society can reduce carbon emissions, decrease dependence on fossil fuels, reduce energy-related costs, improve health outcomes, and create stable jobs for those Americans who have been excluded from recent economic windfalls. At a time when the country is in social and economic transition, we in the profession are well positioned to encourage community leadership to permanently improve the built environment in previously underserved communities. As we architects expand our interest in providing energy efficiencies, water resourcefulness, and solid waste solutions, we also need to advocate for a new green economy.

It Is That Easy Being Green: Low Hanging Fruit and Pragmatic Green Applications

The stylish examples and press coverage of green design are still too focused on new, sexy, high tech, and expensive applications. Our professional publications customarily feature sustainable projects where it appears that return on investment is secondary, design statements are primary and the initial cost of high tech features are not financially achievable or maintainable for the majority of projects.

In reality, we are progressing and expanding pragmatic applications of green building features all the time. These small, affordable steps include home weatherization, household recycling, energy-conserving appliances, water-conserving plumbing fixtures and solar water heaters. Resource-conserving measures have been adopted and used for decades, as the current proliferation of community pea patches, neighborhood farmers markets, bicycle commuting, sales of hybrid vehicles, and expanded use of public transportation illustrates. The array of green applications is nearly limitless when the public consciousness is tuned to identify these opportunities and their connection to greater public well-being and economic payoffs.

Impoverished communities with limited budgets for operating expenses are most in need of high-performing buildings. Publicly subsidized programs that now offer incentives for energy efficiency need to expand to include potable water conservation and waste water reuse. The resulting savings from not building additional electric production facilities, new water distribution systems, and wastewater treatment facilities will offset

public subsidies and ease the utility costs of the financially challenged. In addition to advocacy, architects need to help create better land use and public funding policy that will help drive these much needed changes.

Day-lighting and natural ventilation features were common in buildings in the U.S. until the mid-20th century. Current research and computer modeling can revive use of these common sense features and underscore their benefit. We need only look back 60 or 70 years to find design for buildings that met most of our needs with much less environmental impact. Utilization of modern computer modeling helps to revive those useful building features from our past to make new buildings more resource efficient, healthy, and enduring. Seattle Public Schools current levy "Building Excellence Program" for six new and modernized school buildings is using natural ventilation only designs and eliminating the need for mechanized air conditioning.



Photo: Donald King

The Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center in Seattle's Central District was once Congregation Bikur Cholem, a Jewish Synagogue. Built in 1901, it was repurposed as the center for African American performing arts by the Seattle Parks Department in 1983.

Resource Regeneration: Everything But the “Oink”

The popularity of household waste recycling and curb-side composting is a first step in mass resource regeneration. Most communities of color historically lacked an abundance of material resources and were forced to be more creatively in resource management. My mother used to say that Blacks in the old South used every part of the pig but the “oink.” Our contemporary lifestyle runs counter to the wisdom of many ethnic cultures that have customarily made maximum use of all resources. The advent of landfills for waste disposal is a relatively new phenomenon. The Fresno, California Municipal Sanitary Landfill, opened in 1937, is considered to have been the first modern sanitary landfill. The ubiquitous, yet publicly invisible, landfills are now unconsciously tolerated reservoirs of our waste stream.

Out of financial necessity, low-income communities have renovated rather than built new. Adaptive reuse pre-dates landfills and is a familiar process in these communities. Use of urban buildings abandoned by previous residents show up as synagogues converted to performing arts centers, retail storefronts transformed into Baptist churches, and surplus public schools developed into affordable housing.

Happily, our built environment professionals, property developers, and public officials are beginning to respect and openly celebrate these preservations of great architecture as creative green alternatives to new construction.

As planners, architects, and builders, the most sustainable action we can take is to reuse existing buildings. Strategically substituting renovation with new construction limits the need for mining, manufacturing, and the consumption of new materials. It reduces the need for transport between each of these processes with its resulting carbon emissions. Upwards of 90% of embedded energy is retained in the renovation of a building.

Saving significant neighborhood icons also helps stabilize communities by preserving their sense of historic connection, identity, and positive self-image.



Photo: Steve Keating

The Colman School’s adaptive reuse as the Northwest African American Museum and 36 units of affordable housing, although not LEED certified, is an example of preserving a neighborhood icon while providing energy-efficient reuse and extending the life of a 100-year-old edifice for another 100 years.

In down economies, when new construction can be cost-prohibitive, renovation and reuse can be a labor-intensive yet less expensive development alternative. Both material and human resources can be reemployed for the jobs and economic rejuvenation that renovation can generate.

When a building cannot be saved, the recovery and reuse of deconstructed materials also minimizes the environmental impacts of waste transport and

expanded landfills. Today's deconstruction trades provide opportunities for a larger skilled labor force. Formally structured salvage processes are now being utilized to make deconstruction safer, better organized, and more efficient.

Hopefully, the prevalent model of post-World War II resource wasteful, planned obsolescence has met its end. Its negative influence has unfortunately included the devaluation of human life, our most precious asset. The burgeoning prison population in the U.S. illustrates that as a society we are beginning to accept that some lives are disposable. Our attempts at environmental stewardship will be meaningless if we don't include a commitment to full deployment of our human resource.

Solutions to many of our most challenging social ills can be found by learning from the past to create a new environmentally friendly and economically sustainable forward view. Initiatives that make use of the diverse ideas and wisdom of every citizen can expand and reinvigorate the green movement as it grows beyond a minority of exclusive practices into a broad, inclusive, mainstream standard.

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Donald earned a Master of Architecture degree from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1978 and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Architecture from Wayne State University. He has been a member of the American Institute of Architects since 1979 and was elevated to the AIA College of Fellows in 2000.