

Laminated Glass News

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Creating a new paradigm for architecture: Moving beyond sustainability



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"The significant problems we face today cannot be solved by the same level of consciousness that created them." – Albert Einstein

As an American architecture student learning the art and science of my trade in the early Sixties, I could never have imagined that, more than 40 years later, I would be pouring over international reports on the effects of global warming. Nor could I have understood then that the built environment – especially our emphasis on unnatural design – would be the single largest contributor to the problem.

We find ourselves at a "tipping point" of sorts on the issue of climate change and suddenly the signs are everywhere: an exploding interest in more sustainable approaches to business, government, and the built environment. The idea of sustainability has also gained wider acceptance in the architecture profession in recent years. Since its launch in 1990, AIA's Committee on the Environment has led the way in defining and refining the principles of sustainable architecture. The U.S. Green Building Council emerged in 1993, a multi-disciplinary organization that is transforming the way buildings and communities are designed, built and operated. LEED has become the de facto standard for sustainable design. The World Green Building Council is rapidly gaining momentum as the voice for global green building issues.

Author Malcolm Gladwell's definition of a tipping point is highly illustrative of our times and the current state of sustainable

architecture: "Look at the world around you. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped."

Today, the achievement of LEED Platinum – the highest current rating of sustainability for buildings – is being realized more than ever. Yet we have constantly faced the same quandary: even if every new or renovated building in the world were to achieve this certification, we would still receive alarming news about the accelerating pace of global warming. "Platinum" does not mean we're necessarily achieving sustainability; it simply means we are polluting less, consuming less, etc. So, increasingly, we ask the same question over and over: "Why not do a Living Building?" (i.e. one with no net impact on the environment). Or better yet, "Why not design a Restorative Building?" – one that actually begins to restore the vitality of our natural systems.

No living building has ever been constructed, anywhere in the world – yet. But I believe this to be our next momentous move within architecture and society as a whole. We have the knowledge and the technology now to design structures that generate their own energy, that purify their own air and water, that are connected to clean, efficient transportation systems, and that contribute toward building a sense of community as well as a pedagogy among those who use buildings.

Equally inspiring to me is the conscious, intelligent shift toward incorporating biophilia into all of our designs. Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist, coined the concept of biophilia as "the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes." Because we have not actively designed using this knowledge, we have not created environments for people so they remain connected to, and a part of, nature. As a result, we have grown insensitive to the very thing that is a part of our health, well-being, and productivity.

Today, we have more powerful tools, communication, technology and resources that allow us to be more creative while developing a stronger, collaborative approach – the Einstein approach – to looking at the world differently in order to make more intelligent decisions. We already know this, how to design in a restorative way. It's time to begin.

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