

# Web Exclusive: Pursuing the Living Building Challenge

by Eden Brukman

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Throughout North America and around the world, our communities are changing. Living Buildings are beginning to sprout within gridded boundaries and patchwork developments in metropolitan centers and smaller towns. These projects are distinct because they offer unique place-based solutions to the 16 prerequisites that constitute the Living Building Challenge.

In November 2006, the Cascadia Region Green Building Council launched Living Building Challenge, a rigorous performance standard inspired by restorative-design principles. The program stipulates that each building should function as elegantly and efficiently as a flower. Also rooted in place, a flower harvests all of its own energy and water, is adapted to climate and site, operates pollution free, promotes health and well-being, is comprised of integrated systems, and it is beautiful.

## Rules of Life



The Living Building Challenge is governed by two rules. First, all aspects of the program are mandatory. The prerequisites range from net-zero energy and water independence to non-toxic materials and habitat exchange -- and all of these must be housed within a structure that is aesthetic and inspiring to others. While each of these can be difficult to achieve, perhaps the most testing aspect of the program is the need for practitioners to shift their mindset when tackling design problems and evaluating construction practices.

Ours is an industry that is trained to implement prescriptive measures. The process can be methodical, and as a result, both the full impact and poetry of our actions may be lost. The Living Building Challenge aims to make the approach more experiential and experimental by stating the ambition instead of the course. Project teams not only strengthen their connection to place but also commit to mentor the development.

The second rule in the Living Building Challenge is that all projects must be fully operational for at least 12 consecutive months prior to evaluation. Living Building designation is based on actual, rather than anticipated, performance because an empty building serves no purpose. All who interact with the project, from conceptual designer to occupant, play an active role in its success.

This responsibility extends to a broader group of contributors, as well. Manufacturers who wish their products to be considered for inclusion in Living Buildings must be transparent about their company practices and product ingredients. In this way, the program parallels as an advocacy tool. The Living Building Challenge has seeded a new way of creating buildings, and the program has had an outsized impact through the ripple effect of the dozens of project teams that have put these ideas into action. Project teams have already written dozens of letters to manufacturers summarizing their desire for 'Red List' compliant materials and the deflating of proprietary claims.

## Pressing/Planting the Borders/Natural Resistance

Regulatory bodies are also engaging in the dialogue. Project teams are expected to appeal code restrictions with alternatives that offer better ecological solutions. For example, teams have submitted a variety of innovative solutions for capturing and reusing water on site. In addition, Cascadia staff have embarked on several studies, some initiated by municipalities, to address these perceived limitations to

achieving living buildings. By communicating expectations with others who traditionally are not active participants in the design stages, the tenets of the Living Building Challenge become shared goals.

At the heart of the Living Building Challenge is the belief that society must quickly find a state of balance between the natural and built environments. The program attempts to define the most advanced measure of sustainability using a benchmark of what is currently possible. These first living buildings will serve as models for transformative architecture and add to our collective knowledge. And they will bloom.

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Eden Brukman is the research director for the Cascadia Region Green Building Council. Cascadia promotes the design, construction and operation of buildings in Alaska, British Columbia, Washington and Oregon that are environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy places to live, work and learn. It is one of three original chapters of the USGBC and the largest chapter of the CaGBC. Learn more at

[www.cascadiagbc.org](http://www.cascadiagbc.org).