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[A TWENTY-SOMETHING RIFFS ON GREENBUILD](#)

## Dispatches from the Phoenix Green Building Conference

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by **Auden Schendler**

Recently, an interior designer and massage therapist named Becky Anderson helped me certify an Aspen Skiing Company building (Sam's Restaurant) to LEED Gold. As a reward for her remarkable work, we sent her to the U.S. Green Building Council's enormous, happening-like, and increasingly burning-man scale annual conference, which took place in Phoenix this fall and attracted some 40,000 people into the teeth of a depression. Her dispatch is below.

A few notes: on reading this, I worried that my overly-critical and sometimes cynical take on the green building movement (which [played out](#) in Grist over the years) had tarnished Becky's worldview, even though I personally have substantially changed my position over the years. But Becky isn't completely jaded, despite some outrageous stuff she saw. And at the end, I was glad to see my old colleague and friend Bill Browning was one to provide some hope and inspiration. Go Bill!

### Green Building as Usual

Instead of "Main Street Green," a more apt name for the recent gigantic U.S. Green Building Council conference in Phoenix would have been "Green Building as Usual." Rather than being a formidable resource for the industry and a platform for transformational ideas, Green Build 2009 was an unfortunate lauding of the green building status quo. Educational sessions revolved around getting LEED points rather than the more pertinent discussion of how sustainable a project actually is and the even more pertinent sharing of lessons learned. Nearly every manufacturer in the building industry was praising the green qualities of their wares on the expo floor (including the Vinyl Institute!). Time and again there was a DEFCON 2 disconnect between thought leaders (McKibben, Lovins, Brown, Hawkin, etc.) and the alleged action leaders in attendance.

The most shocking session of the conference was the 'Executive Round Table' moderated by Roger Platt (Sr. VP Global Policy & Law - USGBC). The participants were Arne Sorenson (President & COO Marriot), Robert Peck (Commissioner for Public Buildings - GSA), Mark Nicholls (Sr. VP Corporate Workplace - Bank of America), Michael Crow (President - ASU), Ray Anderson (Interface - Founder & Chairman), Mike Lafitte (President Americas - CB Richard Ellis).

The session was publicized as "ever wonder what was on your CEO's mind when they were setting green and sustainable initiatives for your company?" From the discussion that ensued they were apparently thinking of fine dining and luxury automobiles (Which are sustainable because they last longer—thereby decreasing embedded energy according to Michael Crow.) WTF!?

The moderator's approach was distracting and produced lines of questioning that presented limited opportunity for an elevated discussion among the participants. He asked the (outrageously inappropriate and misdirected) question of what these execs do to green their personal lives. A few months prior to this event I attended a lecture by Ray Anderson. During Q & A when the same question was poised to him he delivered a well prepared quip about his Prius being more luxurious than the Jag he traded it in for. Then he quickly and effectively redirected the discussion, educating the audience about the necessity of demanding reform at institutional levels—where the revolution MUST happen. However, at the Green Build discussion, Anderson quickly delivered the Prius quip and passed the question on, seemingly resigned to a wasted hour.

It was a travesty that neither the moderator nor participants demanded a more rigorous and enlightening forum about the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing real world solutions to combat climate change. The most impressive (painfully seared into my mind) comment of the session was delivered by Mark Nicholls. When queried as to where he hoped to see sustainability in 5 years he replied that he hoped when he goes to a restaurant his waitress doesn't ask if he wants a new glass when she refills his water. He hopes she knows its best to reuse the same glass.

The plus side of a tanked economy (no new construction) was rampant chatter about LEED-EBOM. USGBC's rating system for Existing Buildings: Operations and Maintenance. The rating system is designed "to help building owners and operators measure operations, improvements and maintenance on a consistent scale, with the goal of maximizing operational efficiency while minimizing environmental impacts." Simply, it's a framework for fixing dud buildings and ensuring optimal performance of all structures. Energy, ingenuity, and resources are being funneled into this area, resulting in brilliant innovation and swift progress. Highlights of EBOM sessions were the presentations of the retrofit projects at the [Sears Tower](#) and [Empire State Building](#). Both projects are ambitious and compelling. They showcase advancements possible through collaboration between the private sector, government, and NGOs.

By the last day of the conference I'd resigned myself to frustration and horror at the state of the building industry. Even those who 'get it'—that the revolution necessary in the building sector MUST be more than a green tinted overly on traditional blueprints—shrugged their shoulders as they cited myriad constraints of the system they're obligated to work within. Yet, at the last session of the week the envelope pushing discussion I'd expected throughout the conference finally emerged. Bill Browning (Terrapin), Jason McLennan (Living Building Challenge), and Laura Lesniewski (BNIM Architects) presented to a packed house. The panel began to bridge the gap between thought leaders and the building industry. Browning kicked off the session introducing E.O. Wilson's work on biophilia. Wilson's pioneering research, unique thinking, and popular and scientific writing have altered the way we think of nature and our place in it. McLennan transitioned into how Wilson's research impacted the rating system of the [International Living Building Institute](#) (These guys are total bad asses—follow them on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).) Lesniewski presented a completed project discussing its sustainable aspects (including the actualization of Wilson's research in the built environment) while lightly brushing on it's certification through ILBI. Though biophilia is diminutive in the pictures our thought leaders have painted, it's consideration is an important step in the right direction.

So here's the hope. Eight years ago during Green Build's inaugural year, the 700 individuals in attendance would have been knocked off their rockers to know that less than a decade later 27,000 people would attend and that it would in fact be possible to receive a critique of 'green building as usual.' Given the inertia of the movement, it's difficult to imagine that such a response won't be reproduced by the type of work represented by the Living Building Institute. In ten years, if I can consider myself a part of the construction generation that elicits frustration in the 20-somethings for having only taken design as far as the outlines of ILBI, I'll consider us a success.

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