



Applying LEED Principles to Graphic Design

by Emily Carr

Overview

In today's ongoing discussions regarding sustainability, certification, and the role of graphic design in advancing both, many designers have asked "Why can't we have LEED for graphic design?"

The answer, not surprisingly, is a complicated one. Part of the reason that LEED is well supported and understood in the architecture community is because it exists in a profession that already operates under a system of accreditation. Although architects and interior designers do not have to be accredited to practice, credentialing of is a mark of accomplishment in the field. It is not, however, an indication of design achievement; rather, it demonstrates a complete technical understanding of how buildings and interiors can be designed and built for maximum comfort and safety.

Accreditation within the field of graphic design is a much more vague and contentious subject. Because most graphic design does not constitute a matter of public safety, there is not a civic need to designate certified designers. The design community is divided on the issue of certification, and unlikely to achieve consensus in the near future.

In short, the LEED program, developed by the US Green Building Council, is a voluntary and internationally recognized green building certification system. It can be applied to any building type and any building lifecycle phase. It promotes a whole-building approach to sustainability by recognizing performance in key areas: energy savings, water efficiency, CO₂ emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality, and stewardship of resources and sensitivity to their impacts.

In the meantime, there are many steps individuals and studios can take to make their work more sustainable. Details on the proper utilization of sustainable paper and printing processes can be found elsewhere; the practices described in this document relate to points that can be achieved under the LEED-CI (Commercial Interiors) system.

Applying LEED

There are several ways to incorporate LEED practices into everyday design practices:

1). Selecting a sustainable office location and sign a long-term lease.

Under the Sustainable Sites: Site Selection credit (Credit 1), businesses earn certification points for selecting a workspace that is 1/4 mile from a subway line or within 1/2 mile of two or more bus lines. Selecting a location your office that minimizes the need for the use of automobiles for commuting is one way that you can practice sustainability.

The LEED certification system also rewards business owners that commit to a long-term lease (10 years or more). As office moves are often associated with consumption of materials and waste generated by replacing materials, a long-term lease will encourage less consumption of building materials and furnishings.

2). If possible, select an office in a LEED-Certified building.

Businesses also earn certification points for locating their office in a LEED-certified office building under the Sustainable Sites: Site Selection credit. This guarantees a certain level of sustainability “built in” to your work practices due to the energy efficient systems that are required for LEED-certified buildings.

3). Use energy-efficient computers and appliances.

Reducing your energy consumption is a principle that drives much of the LEED program; under the LEED-CI program, Energy & Atmosphere Credit 1.4 (Optimize Energy Performance, Equipment & Appliances) provides points for using Energy Star approved appliances and/or computers for at least 70% of your energy load. This is calculated in terms of overall energy usage, not percentage of machines, so using Energy Star computers won’t bring you to the correct capacity if you are using an inefficient, older copier that requires the largest portion of your electricity.

Most newer computers and appliances are Energy Star rated, so if you have kept up to date on your hardware, this should not be a difficult objective to achieve.

4). Work with vendors and/or materials produced within a 500-mile radius.

Under the LEED program, this applies to building materials and furnishings; because the architecture and interior design profession is so focused on LEED attainability, many manufacturers have restructured their facilities in order to be able to support this goal.

With so many materials and goods produced overseas, this can be a difficult objective to achieve all the time. However, if you can focus on operating under this principle for large purchases, such as printing, you will be spending the majority of your dollars toward this objective. You can also improve your performance on this objective by supporting vendors that employ sustainable and LEED-friendly practices in their facilities.

5). Minimize or eliminate use of VOCs (volatile organic compounds).

Improving air quality and reducing the use of VOCs is an essential component of numerous LEED credits. Volatile organic compounds are organic chemical compounds that have high enough vapor pressures under normal conditions to significantly vaporize and enter the atmosphere. They are numerous and varied, and although ubiquitous in nature and modern industrial society, they may also be harmful or toxic.

Graphic designers are most likely to VOCs during the preparation of comps or mockups that involves using spray mount. If you must use spray mount, be sure to use it only in an area with proper ventilation (such as a ventilation hood). Or instead, eliminate the use of spray adhesives altogether and instead use double-sided adhesive paper.

You can also limit your intake of VOCs by purchasing furnishings that are sustainable and environmentally friendly. Many materials, such as particleboard or highly treated upholstery, contain VOCs as well.

6). Incorporate sustainable materials into your design.

There are several credits that incorporate reuse and recycling within the Materials & Resources portion of the LEED-CI program. This can be done in several ways: use of recycled materials, or reuse of existing materials. You can also find ways to reuse or divert materials that would otherwise end up in a landfill, such as scrap metal, existing make-readys or design projects, paper or cardboard, or even more creative examples. Re-nourish.com maintains a library of green graphic design projects and can be a great source of inspiration. Architecture and interior design web sites (such as Treehugger.com) are also great for generating ideas about creative ways to reuse materials.

This reuse of materials can be incorporated in your final artifact, but also during the design and development process through reuse and recycling. You should also incorporate a recycling program in your office as part of this effort that is easy to follow and understand.

Looking Ahead

As you can see, there are many ways to incorporate sustainable strategies without using any kind of certification program, and it is not uncommon. Despite the popularity and accessibility of the LEED program, many sustainable interior design and architecture projects are completed without any kind of certification, often because an inability (financial or otherwise) to produce the documentation necessary for the LEED certification process. Although LEED certification is a mark of success, it takes significant time and resources to commit to the process, and not every client or project has those resources available.

The resource and approach that we can share with architecture and interior design is a commitment to a set of principles and the creativity to implement. Regardless of whether or not we have rules to follow, we should evaluate everything that we produce or use, asking, "What's the impact of this? Am I creating waste? Is there a different way that I could create this that would have less environmental impact?" By stopping to ask these questions, we will begin to approach sustainable practices as part of our everyday process, which is where a difference can really be made.

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For Further Reading

www.usgbc.org/
www.aia.org/about/initiatives/AIAB079543
www.re-nourish.com/?l=casestudies_greenprojects
www.treehugger.com