

LEED Architects: The changing face of green

The Business Review | May 25, 2012 | by Michael DeMasi, Reporter

The Business Review's latest special report focuses on the state of green building and architecture, specifically the LEED rating system.

LEED—the acronym stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design—was created by the U.S. Green Building Council to encourage sustainable design.

In this report, we asked four LEED-accredited architects from the greater Albany, New York, market to weigh in on various issues related to LEED. Meet the architects:



Michael Phinney

Firm: Phinney Design Group, Saratoga Springs, New York

Title: Principal

Age: 39

Background: Licensed architect since 2002

LEED-accredited: Since 2002

LEED-certified projects: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation headquarters in Albany, New York; the Bio building at the WILD Center in Tupper

Lake, New York; private residence in Saratoga Springs, New York



Sara Stein

Firm: EYP Architecture & Engineering, Albany, New York

Title: Architect, associate

Background: Licensed architect since 2009

LEED-accredited: Since 2007

LEED-certified projects: Peter Irving Wold Science Center at Union College; U.S. Embassy in Zambia



Nicholas Schwartz

Firm: CHA, Colonie, New York

Title: Associate/senior landscape architect

Age: 43

Background: Licensed architect since 2002

LEED-accredited: Since 2006

LEED-certified projects: Monroe Community College PAC Center in Rochester, New York; Fort Eustis Tactical Equipment Maintenance Facility in Virginia



Karin Kilgore-Green

Firm: JMZ Architects and Planners P.C., Glens Falls, New York

Title: Principal

Age: 48

Background: Licensed architect since 1992

LEED-accredited: Since 2009

LEED-certified projects: Empire State College Distance Learning Center in Saratoga Springs, New York, and Castleton State College Campus Center in Vermont

After a decade of green design, where to now?

If LEED were a nation, this would be a good time to deliver a state of the union address.

Twelve years after the U.S. Green Building Council created LEED to encourage energy-efficient, sustainable design, the rating system has become the best-known way of distinguishing ‘green’ construction techniques.

More than 12,600 buildings worldwide have been LEED-certified (the acronym stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

Despite its growing acceptance, LEED faces criticism among property owners, builders, architects and engineers because of the cost and complexity involved with complying with the standards.

With the USGBC in the midst of developing new guidelines that are set to be released this fall—the first update since 2009—*The Business Review* asked four local LEED-accredited architects for their views of the program.

The architects have different backgrounds and experiences, but all have been part of design teams for buildings that are LEED-certified. We asked each of them the same five questions. This report includes excerpts of their responses.

Q: How would you characterize the state of LEED today?

Karin Kilgore-Green

Title: Principal

Firm: JMZ Architects and Planners P.C. in Glens Falls

A: The LEED rating systems were developed to look comprehensively at the design and construction process and find ways to lessen negative impacts on the environment. I think it is a flexible program that allows a design team to adopt the strategies that work best for a given project. LEED has evolved to place emphasis on aspects of a building that are more environmentally critical, such as energy usage. ... Any program that tries to assign value to a sustainable strategy and quantify its impact will be subject to criticism. It is imperfect, but to my knowledge it has been the most successful and far-reaching program of its kind.

Michael Phinney

Title: Principal

Firm: Phinney Design Group in Saratoga Springs

A: LEED is more recognized than ever. But due to a large growth in the number of people who pursued LEED accreditation over the past 10 years, I believe the USGBC thought it was losing credibility by having such a diverse group of people with various educational backgrounds and expertise be able to say they were all “LEED-accredited professionals.” Because of this it has shifted to essentially two levels of being a LEED professional, the first being the “LEED Green Associate” and the second level relying on the person to choose a focus area of study. In concept, it sounds good. But one of the ways you can become accredited in different focus areas is by taking online courses only the USGBC provides, and the costs are high. It feels like the USGBC is more concerned with making money these days than trying to educate the general public on how they build buildings affects the environment.

Nicholas Schwartz

Title: Associate/senior landscape architect

Firm: CHA in Colonie

A: I think the best word to describe it would be flux. The use of the LEED rating system and the tight economy are sometimes opposing forces and we find clients making tough decisions. In addition, LEED pushes the boundaries to increase baseline efficiencies and new products in the marketplace. With a tight economy, new product development is not as pervasive as it has been over the last 10 years. These forces, with the most recent updates, make the voluntary use of the system a much more challenging endeavor.

Sara Stein

Title: Architect, associate

Firm: EYP Architecture & Engineering in Albany

A: The LEED program is growing and changing, as with everything in our fast-paced world, and I think the USGBC is learning a bit as it goes, too.

In the beginning, the USGBC was concerned with both people, and their professional credentials, and buildings, and their LEED certification. In 2008, the GBCI (Green Building Certification Institute) was formed to deal with the “people” aspect. This divide is still a bit confusing to some people.

Both are nonprofits, and both benefit from the federal government, ranging from stimulus dollars to government regulations for buildings to hit a minimum LEED certification threshold. While many of our clients are asking “Is LEED necessary?” and “Can we do the same things without the formal certification?,” nearly all our government projects contractually require us to not only certify, but hit a certain threshold, often LEED Silver.

Q: Is LEED the gold standard for energy-efficient design and sustainability?

Karin Kilgore-Green

Title: Principal

Firm: JMZ Architects and Planners P.C. in Glens Falls

A: I would not call it the gold standard. There are more stringent and ambitious programs such as the Living Building Challenge. It has, however, become a commonly understood standard that is critical in our field so that teams of consultants, clients, building product manufacturers and contractors can all be “reading from the same book.” It’s taken several years for this to happen and I think that alone is a major accomplishment. It is also a program that building owners can grasp and now has meaning to the general public.

Michael Phinney

Title: Principal

Firm: Phinney Design Group in Saratoga Springs

A: It is without question the most recognized and credible system for evaluating and quantifying green building strategies throughout the design and construction process for a diverse array of project types.

Nicholas Schwartz

Title: Associate/senior landscape architect

Firm: CHA in Colonie

A: I think LEED has become synonymous with sustainability within certain markets, especially in the government and higher education markets. These segments really embraced and adopted LEED as their metric

to be able to quantify and publicly show their commitment to sustainability. In other markets, it seems to just be getting attention, while in others clients are determined to show their sustainability in other ways.

Sara Stein

Title: Architect, associate

Firm: EYP Architecture & Engineering in Albany

A: LEED is a standard, but likely the most widely recognized. I have been finding for international projects, the criteria outlined in LEED are superseded by stricter standards, especially in Europe. However, in the United States, it's a well-recognized, easy-to-compare-to standard. ... LEED does not always capture the sustainable story of a project, nor the well-roundedness that architects should implement as a simple matter of professional responsibility.

Q: Has LEED become too bureaucratic?

Karin Kilgore-Green

Title: Principal

Firm: JMZ Architects and Planners P.C. in Glens Falls

A: LEED is about documenting and quantifying the environmentally friendly strategies employed in a design and oftentimes comparing them to a common set of reference standards. In this sense it needs to be bureaucratic, as the intent is to avoid unsupported claims. ... However, I will say that recently the USGBC had made the process of maintaining the LEED professional credential very complicated. It is more complex and labor-intensive than what is required to maintain my professional architectural license.

Michael Phinney

Title: Principal

Firm: Phinney Design Group in Saratoga Springs

A: I met (USGBC co-founder) David Gottfried at the first USGBC Green Build conference. While having a drink with him at the bar, he explained he started USGBC to get the public aware of the magnitude of environmental impacts and human health concerns the building industry has in today's society. ... We discussed how we thought the USGBC would peak and then become invalid because the recommendations of the LEED system would eventually become standard practice and become integrated into standard building codes. Although this has happened to some extent, it seems the USGBC and LEED has become larger, bigger and more complex than ever for the average Joe to understand.

Nicholas Schwartz

Title: Associate/senior landscape architect

Firm: CHA in Colonie

A: In most cases, the growth of the organization has been good. One thing that has become more common are comments from clients, design professionals and contractors that every update ... seems to make LEED certification a more complicated process. There is a balance with the level of documentation required. ... I believe this is where most people see the bureaucracy in a negative light. Additional documentation in most cases means additional time and money.

Sara Stein

Title: Architect, associate

Firm: EYP Architecture & Engineering in Albany

A: From version 2.2 to 3.0, there was a significant, positive shift in how the "paperwork" gets filled out online.

A new website is more intelligent, and automatically links a lot of information, which greatly helps project teams. Version 3 also recognized, however, that the owners have responsibility, too, so there is paperwork, commitments, signatures, etc., required now of the owners. Previously, this all fell into the hands of the architect, or the LEED coordinator. Now that the responsibility is shared, it feels like a lot more work to some.

Q: Has LEED become so ubiquitous that it no longer stands out from traditional design?

Karin Kilgore-Green

Title: Principal

Firm: JMZ Architects and Planners P.C. in Glens Falls

A: As most architects would say, sustainable design is just good design. The LEED program gives us a common point of reference. Personally, I think LEED certification and the various levels are still “special.” They substantiate that the design and construction followed through on the project’s sustainability goals. LEED has become more commonplace among our higher education clients than I’ve seen in commercial and residential design and construction. There is still a long way to go.

Michael Phinney

Title: Principal

Firm: Phinney Design Group in Saratoga Springs

A: Again, because many building standards and codes have changed over the past decade to incorporate many of the prerequisites and recommendations of the LEED rating system, I think to some it may seem ubiquitous. However, I think this is one of the greatest achievements of the USGBC and the LEED rating system—to create systematic change in how we design and build in today’s world. I believe if we can get to a day where LEED is considered “traditional design” then the purpose and mission of the USGBC have been achieved.

Nicholas Schwartz

Title: Associate/senior landscape architect

Firm: CHA in Colonie

A: I don’t think so. I still talk to a lot of clients who may have heard the term “LEED” but don’t know what it means or how it works. There is still a large segment of the general population that knows what the concept of sustainability is but not all of the tools in the toolbox, with LEED being the largest.

Sara Stein

Title: Architect, associate

Firm: EYP Architecture & Engineering in Albany

A: In some ways, sure. Merely saying “I designed a LEED-certified building” is not enough of an accomplishment to let the story end there. I’m not in the business to simply check points off a list. Rather, my professional responsibility is to design buildings that are safe, productive and sustainable environments for people, without depleting the natural—and limited—resources we have.

Q: What changes do you suggest for the program? Should it be scrapped in favor of a new system?

Karin Kilgore-Green

Title: Principal

Firm: JMZ Architects and Planners P.C. in Glens Falls

A: It should not be scrapped. It would take years to regain the momentum that LEED has built. The bar needs to be incrementally raised. The program has evolved substantially, for example, by developing rating programs for

building operations and maintenance, homes, health care and neighborhood development. The system has also evolved to include credits for regional priorities to recognize that different places have different challenges from a sustainability standpoint. The LEED rating system has and will continue to evolve.

Michael Phinney

Title: Principal

Firm: Phinney Design Group in Saratoga Springs

A: I think the USGBC should think about how to make the system more available and more easily understood by the average person. I also think they desperately need to focus on how to make the process of LEED certification for a building less costly for the owners.

Nicholas Schwartz

Title: Associate/senior landscape architect

Firm: CHA in Colonie

A: The ratings system has a process in place to be able to adapt and change and also to provide input from the public at large. I think the balance of documentation required to determine credit compliance will be front and center over the next few years and this will determine how the rating system will be received.

Sara Stein

Title: Architect, associate

Firm: EYP Architecture & Engineering in Albany

A: Starting over from scratch with a new system wouldn't change any of the challenges associated with LEED in my eyes. I don't think there will ever be one system or criterion to compare against that will be perfect for every building typology in every location in the world. ... As with any governing body of building codes, criteria, or standards, everyone involved should realize we live in a changing world that is constantly developing based on lessons learned, and each project should be looked at individually, rather than assuming it'll be done exactly as a prior project was.



Michael Phinney, one of the architects who contributed to this report, worked on the LEED-certified state Department of Environmental Conservation headquarters (pictured) earlier in his career. The downtown Albany, New York, building exemplifies how LEED has taken hold in public-sector building projects. In other sectors, “it seems to just be getting attention,” says architect Nicholas Schwartz.