

Green - but not by the gold standard

LEED was not economically feasible, but that didn't stop ad firm from applying sustainable design principles

JAY SOMERSET

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Environmentally friendly buildings are all the rage these days, but for some landlords and tenants achieving the gold standard for green is not always feasible.

Sometimes, especially in older buildings, it's not economically realistic to renovate under the rigorous design and materials standards that would qualify it for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.

Wunderman Canada learned that this year when it embarked on a major overhaul of its offices located in a 30-year-old building on Toronto's Bloor Street West. But that didn't stop the advertising agency from bringing a sustainable design to its renovation project nonetheless.

"You don't need LEED certification to make significant changes to your office," says Monique Jahn of architectural firm HOK Canada and the lead designer on the Wunderman project. "Choose finishes that don't give off harsh chemicals. Install products that don't require chemical solvents. Look for recycled materials."

The Wunderman renovation, while not LEED-certified, includes many LEED-quality design elements, such as linoleum, "a natural-source product made from linseed oil and pine resin with no plastic or chemicals," Ms. Jahn says. "It's easy to clean, doesn't collect dust like carpeting and has a long life cycle.

"This is key - if [a product isn't] durable, it will need to be replaced quickly, which defeats the whole point of sustainable design."

Lighting is also integral to sustainable design. "Ideally, you should leave the perimeters open to allow natural light to flow through the office," says Don Crichton, vice-president of office solutions at HOK. "The Wunderman space had existing offices around the perimeter that blocked light, but rather than tear them down and create waste, we installed clear-glass walls and doors that allow the light to shine through."

The walls can be reconfigured and packed up like office furniture if and when the company relocates.

Purchasing "green" products doesn't mean shelling out more money. "Manufacturers have realized that producing less waste and using less water and chemicals saves them money, too," Ms. Jahn says, "and as they save money, their products go down in price."

With or without LEED, the idea is to go back to the basics of sustainability and see what can be done with the space, adds Gordon Stratford, design director at HOK Canada. Once the basics are in place - efficient heating, ventilation, air conditioning and lighting, carpet and furniture with long life spans - "then it's about creating an enjoyable, healthy place to work."

"Landlords are now focusing on improving their stock of [efficient] space because this is what companies are looking for when they lease space," Mr. Stratford says.

And a sustainable design increasingly is what employees are seeking in their workplaces, according to a recent survey of Canadian office tenants by Colliers International.

According to the survey, 91 per cent of commercial tenants would give preference to a green building, while 94 per cent believe sustainability is an important future component of good business practices as high-performance green buildings and commercial interiors can be cost effective, increase employee comfort, retention and recruitment, and attract new business, Colliers said in a release last week.

Tenants are not just looking at commercial office space in economic terms, adds John O'Toole, vice-president at CB Richard Ellis in Toronto. "Worker comfort, air quality and satisfaction with the work environment are becoming standard expectations of tenants." This includes factors such as energy efficiency, proximity to public transit, creature comforts such as indoor bike racks and showers and working windows.

"We could have found cheaper office space in [the suburbs], but this would mean moving off the subway line," says Lianne Grady, vice-president of client operations at Wunderman.

"Since most of our employees take the subway to and from work, moving away would have been inefficient and unpopular."

Worker comfort, often pushed aside as an afterthought, is integral to sustainable design and profitability. "It's an operational issue," says Carol Smith, senior partner at SGH Design Partners in Toronto. "There are cost reductions directly associated with healthy employees."

Like HOK, SGH has designed office space for many large companies including RBC Dominion Securities. "Our RBC office design included lots of natural light and showers so employees can ride their bikes to work without worrying about arriving all sweaty," Ms. Smith says.

"Providing a workplace with lots of natural light and access to comforts such as health clubs might seem like expenses, but they're really cost reductions," she says. "You're

improving employee retention and creating an atmosphere of health, productivity and increased morale."

Wunderman employees get discounts at two health clubs nearby the office, and a yearly allowance to put toward a health club membership or other sporting equipment. "It's not a lot of money," says vice-president Ms. Grady, "but it's something."

THE OFFICE RENO DIARY

This is the last of a monthly series that followed Wunderman Canada as it renovated its Toronto workspace.