

## The Bad News About Green Architecture

**Sustainable buildings are virtuous, but they can be ugly. Only a few designs are truly great.**

**Cathleen McGuigan**

NEWSWEEK

Updated: 3:29 PM ET Sep 6, 2008

I hate green architecture. I can't stand the hype, the marketing claims, the smug lists of green features that supposedly transform a garden-variety new building into a structure fit for Eden. Grassy roofs? Swell! Recycled gray water to flush the toilets? Excellent! But if 500 employees have to drive 40 miles a day to work in the place—well, how green is that? Achieving real sustainability is much more complicated than the publicity suggests. And that media roar is only getting louder. The urge to build green is exploding: more than 16,000 projects are now registered with the U.S. Green Building Council as intending to go for a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)—or sustainable—certification, up from just 573 in 2000.

Among those are various plans to build at least 50 million square feet of new green resorts in Las Vegas, where ecoconsciousness is suddenly as hot as Texas Hold 'Em. The largest LEED-rated building in the country is the 8.3 million-square-foot Palazzo Resort Hotel and Casino, which opened there last January. As it happens, the state of Nevada offers developers property-tax rebates—up to 35 percent—for LEED certification. Don't worry about the tons of jet fuel that will be used to deliver millions more tourists to Vegas each year—those visitors can help make up for that by reusing the towels in their hotels.

When it comes to green, people don't want to hear that size matters. We keep building not just bigger entertainment complexes but bigger houses. "Green McMansion" is one of my favorite oxymorons. Currently the average new house is 2,500 square feet, up 1.5 percent in size from last year—though the shock of this winter's fuel bills may finally slow the trend. Building green houses—or at least advertising them as green—is on the rise, though there are no national standards about what constitutes a green home. People are attracted to sustainable houses partly as a cool novelty, when in fact green dwellings have been around for eons. Think of igloos, tepees or yurts—they took advantage of readily available local materials and were designed to suit their specific environments. Shelters around the world tend to be situated to benefit from the sun in the winter or to shield their inhabitants from chilling winds. But we forgot those basic principles when we plunked down every possible style of house into our sprawling American suburbs.

If you want to understand what makes sustainable sense, check out the classic old shotgun houses of New Orleans that best survived Katrina (and just got a pass from Gustav): these modest homes are built high off the ground to resist flood damage; they are made of local wood that dries out; they have high ceilings and cross ventilation to deal with the stifling summer heat. But the houses that were ruined—whether in the Lower Ninth Ward or more-affluent neighborhoods—tended to be low-slung ranch houses, a style originally developed for the climate of California.

What bugs me most about the fad for green architecture is the notion that virtue makes for better design. OK, I suppose an ugly green building is better than an ugly nongreen building—but it's still ugly. So when I come upon a beautiful sustainable building that doesn't scream green, it cheers me up. The California Academy of Sciences, opening later this month in San Francisco, is a perfect example. It replaces the old science museum that was damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Its design is sensitive to its place and history: the new building doesn't gobble up more space on its spectacular site in Golden Gate Park, and its architect, Renzo Piano, was careful to go no higher—36 feet—than the original structure. The most obvious ecofeature of his elegantly simple glass-sided pavilion is the green roof: a rolling 2.5-acre terrain, inspired in part by the surrounding hills, it cleverly disguises, under its two biggest bumps, the domes of the planetarium and of the rainforest exhibit underneath. The roof is planted with 40 native species (unlike Golden Gate Park itself, which was created out of a sand pit and includes such glamorous nonnatives as palm trees). The plants are kind of low and scrubby—though they bloom at various times—but they were chosen less for prettiness than hardiness, and the fact that they won't need irrigation.

There are lots of examples of innovative green technology in the building, but perhaps the most surprising is in the museum's offices where, says the executive director, Gregory Farrington, you can see hardware that's rare in today's buildings: handles to open the windows. That's because, amazingly, there's no artificial cool air. The only air conditioning is provided free of charge by the breezes that blow off the Pacific—including those that are naturally pulled down by that curvy roof into a lovely open piazza at the center of the museum. "It's a building that breathes with nature," says Piano. And all the gizmos that make this building even greener—the weather sensors that dim or brighten the artificial lights; the thousands of little solar cells tucked into the roof overhangs; the old denim jeans recycled as insulation—are so carefully integrated into the overall architecture that you hardly notice them. Of course, the green features will be explained in the museum's education programs—each year, 50,000 San Francisco schoolkids will visit its aquarium, alligator pool and other exhibits of the living and the dead. But personally, I like that Piano's trademark gifts for inventive design and great craftsmanship seem to make the sustainable elements disappear. "Making green buildings is a practical answer," he says in the accent of his native Italy. "But architecture is about desire; it's about dreams."

Spoken like a true romantic, but the point is right-on: sustainability is about the practical systems of building, not the beauty of great design. Established architects like Piano—he's 71—have learned to integrate green into their practices, depending on where they're working (the rules are strict in many countries of Europe, where Piano is based). But for the next generation of architects, sustainability will be second nature—they're learning in architecture schools how to incorporate green into design, and some of them will become the innovators who'll devise ever more efficient ecological solutions. And the U.S. Green Building Council is continuing to evolve its suggested standards: access to mass transit, rather than the necessity of cars, gets credit, as does adapting to a specific climate—a principle central to the sustainability of the California Academy of Sciences. It's expected to score a LEED platinum rating, making it the greenest museum in the United States. But I wish we didn't have to trumpet that achievement in the same breath as praising its design. I look forward to a future when green architecture won't be discretionary but required of every architect and builder. Then we could all shut up about it. Sustainable features would become as exciting as the plumbing systems and as essential as a roof that keeps out the rain.