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BROWN ON GREEN

Q&A with Hillary Brown, AIA, LEED

Oculus: You created the Office of Sustainable Design for the City's public works agency, the NYC Department of Design & Construction (DDC). Are you satisfied, now that you are a private consultant on environmental issues, with the pace, scope and scale of the City's efforts to create high performance public buildings?
Hillary Brown:
DDC continues to aggressively progress its program, deepening its commitment to green in useful and imaginative ways. I wish that the pace were faster in rolling out these practices for the remainder of the City's programs, given the accomplishments and the tools now available. Local government programs in general should work much harder to embolden each other, sharing lessons learned about the barriers and opportunities common to all. Some of this has been captured in the 2001 publication of the US Green Building Council – Local Government Toolkit, which we co-authored.

O: The Department of Design and Construction created dozens of superlative demonstration green projects during the period of time that you headed its environmental program and served as Assistant Commissioner for Architecture & Engineering. Many other projects, however, did not benefit from the high performance guidelines or the oversight that you and your staff provided on materials and systems. Is there any lingering disappointment that there were not more mainstreaming of these efforts to include more NYC public projects?
HB: There were some disappointments, but I found that two things are of uppermost importance in implementing a program like this. First, finding real *champions* for high performance among the clients (owners and users) who would adopt these principles creatively, and as their own. Second, always staying focused on aligning the green building objectives with the core service mission of the client and doing those things well. For example, the emphasis on daylighting for a library, indoor environmental quality for courtrooms, healthy materials for daycare centers. Often, LEED doesn't ultimately allow that flexibility in emphasis, which is why I also favor the use of Guidelines.

O: What can be done to better mainstream sustainable practices in urban planning and architecture?
HB: First let's celebrate what seems an exponential increase in thinking green in the design world. A *desire*, across disciplines and sectors, to apply sustainable principles and practices, even though not yet reflected in *know-how*. This public quest is a good indicator, bringing with it a significant clamor for tools, products, data, and success stories. Along with advocates and early adopters, a more active public can turn its attention to removing barriers to mainstreaming sustainability.

O: What are some of the barriers?

HB: Two barriers top my list. One is our low level of industry commitment to R&D. Relative to many other countries, we reinvest a lower percentage of building industry GDP in research and development. We've forfeited our early leads in renewable technology, are under-funding building science research in our universities and government labs, and have far to go in addressing linkages between materials science and public health, between ecological health and social health.

Which brings me to the other issue in mainstreaming: the continuing low standing of ecological design in the professional pedagogy for architects and planners. There are still only a handful of schools whose studios actively encourage the use of sustainable principles generatively for design. Few who promote integration of high performance principles into history/theory, materials and methods, and the teaching of professional practice? Sustainable design is all too often relegated to the

province of `environmental technology', and consequently has achieved little standing in the dominant discourse.

O: Does LEED go far enough?
HB: LEED is the most important common infrastructure we have now in mainstreaming high performance. As I've often said regarding LEED and High Performance Guidelines, they function as training wheels. And I foresee that we need them to keep us on a straight course for a period of time. LEED and many guidelines help us by telling us the *why,* the *what, how, and how much.* In this country, we are significantly invested in this tool. Happily by virtue of its participatory development (it's written/ reviewed by emerging green builders and experts) it works by consensus and is being significantly expanded to cover under-addressed building types and sectors. But LEED has a limited role. It cannot stand in for appropriate design education. Nor would I suggest we use it to direct our research and development investment. It mustn't in of itself become a regulatory tool and I don't think that it is the best possible policy instrument (though it has been accepted by default in many cases). We are going to need a lot more than a LEED system in moving towards ecological solvency. We need to jump scales *and* disciplines in our environmental problem solving, rolling out new practices for industrial design, civil engineering, and the planning disciplines.

O: What alternatives or supplements to LEED already exist?
HB: There are excellent examples all over the country of guidelines that have been developed specific to large capital programs – particularly by government agencies and universities. Here in NYC, customized guidelines impact all the work at Battery Park City and at the MTA.

O: How can the evolving focus on sustainability issues in architecture and design influence other disciplines?
HB: One example of moving ecological design into adjacent disciplines is the forthcoming City of New York High Performance Infrastructure Guidelines, an undertaking of the Design Trust for Public Space and the DDC and a companion piece to the earlier HP Building Guidelines. In this project, we (the Design Trust Fellows and City team) wanted to provide a roadmap for incorporating sustainable practices into the design and construction of the public-right-of-way. Even though these improvements are likely to be put in place only incrementally, the overall benefits will accrue as they become implemented long-term on a city-wide basis: reduction of the `urban heat island effect", air quality improvements, improved local hydrology, reduced waste, increased public health and safety and quality of life.

O: What are the current projects of New Civic Works? How do you select for whom to work?

HB: We've been so lucky in targeting good clients – DDC, SUNY, the City of New Haven, for example, who want to revamp their building programs towards sustainability Ultimately, what we look for are clients who are willing to partner in research and writing, and extend the guideline development process to include us in the implementation phase. For New Haven, we are working with ten different design firms doing schools and get to share information and lessons learned among all of them.

O: With all the discussion of red states and blue states, can a "green state" be identified as a state of mind that might bring some measure of unity to an ideologically polarized electorate, or is energy efficiency as a political issue linked to, say, those who are not reliant on the energy industry for campaign funding?
HB: That's an important question to answer and a very hopeful point for a largely polarized nation. What's so compelling about the high performance initiatives sweeping the country is that it has champions on both sides of the aisle. Both parties recognizing how well economic and environmental interests can converge and acting accordingly.