

Greenwashing the Construction Industry

BY GRAEME SHARPE, P.E., LEED AP

Talking the green talk without walking the green walk misses the whole (green) point.

BY CONSENSUS OF OPINION, “sustainability” means “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Everyone involved in the construction industry, including civil and structural engineers, has a major role to play in sustainability.

Every resource to which we have access is limited in some way, and misallocation of those resources can cause all sorts of environmental, social, and economic distress. The recent global spike in oil prices and resulting economic collapse should remind us that this is not an academic exercise, and governments do not foresee every problem nor do they act quickly enough to manage them. Just over the horizon we can easily guess there will be resource issues concerning water, energy (again), and agricultural products. There is a lot of work to be done in the coming years to figure this all out.

In Name Only

However, there are a lot of companies out there that are still interested in doing business as usual but making it appear as though they are taking steps towards sustainability. When a company puts out misleading information regarding its environmental policies, puts more emphasis on green marketing than sustainable development, or begins a marketing campaign about new sustainable initiatives before anything is done to support those initiatives, it is considered “greenwashing.” A small percentage of greenwashing is due to honest misunderstandings, but the

much larger share is deliberate and shameful (see “Greenwash Brigade” on NPR’s website—www.publicradio.org/columns/sustainability/greenwash—for an anti-greenwashing group that deserves a bit of attention).

The most frustrating case I can think of is the attempt by some agricultural firms wanting to dilute the meaning of the term “organic.” Agricultural innovators worked for decades to bring this term to public awareness and as soon as people began to see the benefits and began buying organic products, certain agricultural interests and marketers wanted to get in on the action. However, few were willing to invest the capital to create truly organic products and began to lobby the USDA to change the definition of organic so that it would include their offerings. The organic label largely survived the assault, but the threat still exists.

Eco-Friendly or Eco-Nuisance?

In the world of construction, similar greenwashing activities are growing more prevalent. The number of TV shows offering “green” construction products or advice is nauseating. Common sense should rule here, but I think there really is no way that gutting an existing house in good shape and replacing all the finishes with green products is going to be ecologically friendly. It’s just thinly disguised consumerism and a poorly conceived advertisement.

Sustainability is not something you can purchase at your local home improvement warehouse. It involves a comprehensive plan that addresses many facets of environmental issues and the public welfare. But if you are looking for a shortcut, the old hierarchy of “reduce, reuse, recycle” still applies.

The proper way to spot construction greenwashing is to investigate whether a development has independent third-party credentials. The United States Green Building Council’s LEED program, Energy Star homes, and other third-party certification programs are available. If a building development cannot show these credentials, do they at least offer data to the public so their claims can be evaluated? If none of this is available, it is likely that the development is being promoted as green but that no steps have actually been taken to promote sustainability.

Sustainability will be a key metric for construction projects of the future; don’t let your standards lapse just because there is money to be made. If you are engaging in greenwashing, it is likely your sustainability credentials and your professional reputation will suffer.

MSC



Graeme Sharpe is a structural engineer with Silver Creek Engineering, Inc. in Indianapolis. He is also the author of the A/E-related blog “A Place of Sense” at www.aplaceofsense.com, where this article originally appeared. He can be reached at graeme.sharpe@gmail.com.

Have an opinion you’d like to share in “Topping Out”? Send your feedback to Geoff Weisenberger, senior editor, at weisenberger@modernsteel.com.