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Environmental Awareness Re-Shapes Design Practices

BY RACHEL WILSON



From Left Bob Land, Joe Wieronski and Rebecca Conrad

When Rebecca Conrad and Joe Wieronski received their certification in “green” design last month, they became the only owners of a major Memphis architecture firm to have the accreditation.

Conrad and Wieronski, partners at Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects, received their Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification from the U.S. Green Buildings Council. Now they hope to put those skills to work in encouraging Memphis developers to embrace green design.

LEED is designed to recognize individuals in architecture who have demonstrated a thorough knowledge and understanding of green building practices.

Individuals applying for LEED certification must pass an exam that tests their knowledge on water conser-

vation of a building, protection of energy and atmosphere, reduction of energy consumption, energy efficient air conditioning and heating, use of indigenous plant materials and other categories of design.

“The U.S. Green Building Council developed LEED to be a system or guideline to building smartly,” Wieronski says. “We should build in such a way that is low impact on the environment.

“We need to become more aware of ways to design more energy-efficient buildings,” he says. “If you can incorporate something that will save the owner money, that’s a plus.”

Architects as well as buildings can be certified, but only a few buildings in the country are LEED certified. Wieronski says there are no LEED accredited buildings in Memphis.

Bob Land, project manager for Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects who received his LEED certification last year, says an architecture group started the LEED certification process four years ago because they wanted a third party added to the building process that could quantify building procedures and ensure that guidelines are kept.

“It (LEED) forces you to study different aspects of sustainability and familiarize yourself with other options out there,” Land says.

The exam is comprehensive to make sure the test taker thoroughly understands and is capable of practicing green building guidelines, Land says. Also, a building receives two points toward its LEED accreditation if one of the architects is LEED certified.

As for types of exam questions, Wieronski says they might ask the test taker to list usable plants and materials indigenous to the Mid-South area, ways to replace costly energy sources with free resources, methods of using natural sunlight and efficient uses of water.

“There are a lot of practices we aren’t doing that we could be,” Wieronski says. “If we do things a different way, we can do some really great things for the city.” Conrad says the LEED exam is either pass or fail. It can, however, be taken as many times as the test taker wants.

It’s not extremely difficult for a person to be certified,” Conrad says. “It’s studying up on the rating system, reading material and taking an exam that tests your knowledge of the system.”

Conrad says the term “green” refers to a building that is sustainable to the environment. Designing a green building involves paying attention to materials

and taking advantage of environmental resources. Architects are encouraged to use materials native to the area, Conrad says, because indigenous materials are renewable.

“If a material is renewable, it can be regenerated within 8-10 years,” Conrad says.

One of the main problems of not practicing green building guidelines, Wieronski says, is the huge loss of energy caused by non-green buildings. 40% of energy in the U.S. is used by buildings, but by changing a few basic things, a lot of money can be saved, he says.

Although Memphis does not have any LEED certified buildings or many in the process, Wieronski believes the concept will grow with architects as the city of Memphis increases in size. “It (LEED) is not as big in Memphis because our energy is so cheap,” Wieronski says. “We want to be at the forefront and learn more as time goes on. It will be more and more incorpo-

rated into our building practices.”

Memphis has very inexpensive water, Conrad says, which is one of the reasons the city has been slow to incorporate green building designs. When water is inexpensive, there is not as much need to make faucets, sinks and toilets extremely energy efficient. People in the Memphis area are not as concerned with green design principles, especially because they are more sheltered, she says.

LEED, the governing agency of green design, is the way of future, Conrad says. Although the government is getting behind architects who practice green building practices, many of the issues do not have a lot of meaning for people. But as more people gain knowledge, green practices will become more widely used, she says.

“LEED will continue to gain momentum,” Land says. “There is the misconception that a green building has to cost more, but a lot of it is really just using better design practices.”

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