

# Environmental Design+Construction

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## Greening the Building Codes By David Eisenberg

Environmental design and construction is growing and beginning to influence mainstream practice. We see a maturing process taking place as more green projects are completed and well documented in case studies. There is, however, much still to be done if we are to achieve the larger goal of transforming mainstream practice in ways that will even begin to approach sustainability.

In April, I attended the First Draft Code Change Hearings for the International Building Codes in Alexandria, VA. The three model code organizations in the U.S. — the Building Officials and Code Administrators of America; the Southern Building Code Congress International, Inc.; and the International Conference of Building Officials — have formed the International Code Council with the goal of creating a single national family of building codes for the U.S. The hearings represented the first public forum for proposed changes to these codes.

One thing stood out at those hearings: the green design, building and sustainable development communities are not participating in the process of creating these new codes. Virtually every other constituency related in any way to building was present and fully engaged in representing their interests. Every other material industry, manufacturing sector, engineering and design association, financial interest, building trade, owner or user group was involved in the process. In eleven straight, very long days of minutely focused discussion of the codes, I never heard mention of resource issues, environmental impacts, or most of the other issues that environmental design and construction are intended to address. We're not even on the radar screen.

I pose a challenge to this community — that we become as serious in representing the interests of the future and our emerging industry as those representing mainstream practice are in defending the status quo. I would further ask that we carefully examine the global implications of standard practice in the U.S. today, even "green" standard practice, and that we become powerful advocates for significant change, not just slow, incremental change.

The impacts are staggering. Buildings account for roughly 40% of both material and energy resources entering the global economy. According to the DOE, in 1996 there were 76.5 million residential buildings and about 5 million commercial buildings in the U.S., with another 38 million projected to be built by the year 2010. That is nearly half the total number of buildings in existence now in the U.S., which already use 10% of the world's energy production.

Nearly every aspect of current practice spells eventual disaster in terms of waste, climate change, resource depletion, and loss of biodiversity. There is little awareness of these consequences among those creating the new codes. What we do in this country greatly influences aspirations and practices in developing countries, and the International Codes will have international consequences, whether they are adopted, serve as models, or just codify, and thereby promote, our high-impact building methods. Can we, in good conscience, encourage developing countries to replicate the very patterns that we are all working so hard to reverse here? Our expertise and wisdom are crucial in this process, not just as individual voices but as a vital emerging community of vision and concern, with far better alternatives for the future than what we face on our present path.

I urge everyone to become involved — locally, regionally, and nationally. Educate yourselves, your colleagues, your clients, your communities, and your building officials about the importance of these issues. Support those organizations that are leading this effort and advocate within your own to become involved. Then set your creative talents to work on creating meaningful change.

