

Taking the LEED

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I attended a fairly intriguing business luncheon the other day. It was all about environmental sustainability and what people – individuals, businesses, governments and other organizations – are doing to achieve it.

These days, people seem to be doing a lot of talking about going green, reducing their carbon footprints or some other catchy eco buzzword. But what the heck does all that mean?

I had heard of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) principles, but had never seen them put into practice. LEED is basically a suite of environmentally sustainable guidelines developers can use when designing and building projects. The guidelines cover everything from energy-efficient lighting to reusing gray water to geothermal heating. The more your design adheres to the principles, the better accreditation you get (silver, gold, platinum).

Robert Parlane, an architect with CEI who spoke at the luncheon, discussed a similar organization, the Living Building Challenge. His company is following their guidelines in constructing the new Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Building Technologies & Renewable Energy at the Penticton campus of Okanagan College.

The building's name is a mouthful, but when it is completed in 2011 it will be primarily used for the college's trade programs. I can't imagine a better learning environment for the Okanagan's next generation of community builders.

It has green roofs, meaning there are actual plants growing on top of the building (and not just that gunky green moss you see growing under the shingles of dilapidated houses). It helps restrict water runoff during severe rainstorms, and it will keep the building cool in summer.



AT RANDOM
Graeme Corbett

There is a walkway on the roof so students can study how the building's ventilation, rain collection and solar panel systems work. Not only is this facility going to be the classroom, in many ways it will be the course content.

Also at the luncheon, there was a speaker from B.C. Hydro's Power Smart program who discussed the various things individuals can do to be more energy efficient.

Given that my dad worked for Hydro for more than 30 years, you'd think I would have been brought up to be at least a little energy conscious. Not so.

I remember one year when they had their "save energy day" (something like that), and the idea was for residents to shut off their lights and conserve energy in any other way they could, just for one day to see what difference it would make. Well, we get this phone call that night from our neighbour saying "Don't you guys know it's save energy day, you guys are lit up like the Griswold's on *Christmas Vacation*."

Sure enough, we had nearly every light on while the rest of the neighbourhood looked like they had been put on curfew.

Even though I still get "reminded" by my girlfriend to turn off unnecessary lights now and then, I think I've come a long way in being more environmentally conscientious. I recycle everything I can, I compost, I replaced all my old light bulbs with compact fluorescents.

Yet there are still things I can be better at. I cringe whenever a server hands me a Styrofoam cup when I go to buy coffee, but I still drink it, knowing that's one more cup that will end up in a landfill. If I were really smart, I'd remember to bring my own mug and get a refill.

The same thing happens when I go grocery shopping – I get to the counter and realize I've got a dozen reusable bags hanging on the banister at home. How hard is it to just have them in my car?

It has been my experience that we humans rarely do things to change the way we live, unless we are forced to do them out of necessity, or are offered some kind of incentive.