ACSF Topical Lunch (10/5/12)

Title: Should Cornell Buildings Be LEED-Certified?

Host: Jonathan Ochshorn, Professor, Department of Architecture, jo24@cornell.edu

Brief Summary:

The LEED rating systems for green building design, promulgated by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) "are voluntary, consensus-based, and market-driven." Because they are voluntary, their impact on state, national, and global development is minimal (even the USGBC can find no reduction in U.S. building energy use as a result of its LEED program — both LEED version 2.2 and LEED 2009 cite the same percentages of total energy and electricity used by buildings to justify their voluntary quidelines). Because they are consensus-based — containing elements appealing to various constituencies, each with its own interests — the individual credits for certification sometimes contradict each other and, in general, lack coherence. Because they are market-driven, the same profit-seeking forces which are largely responsible for current crises in environmental and human well-being are idealized and invoked. LEED certification is a costly branding device and marketing strategy, but lacks intellectual rigor. Certification at a particular level has no consistent meaning. Cornell's Milstein Hall, for example, is anticipated to save only 2% compared to current energy standards, uses more steel per square foot than the 100-story Hancock Tower is Chicago, makes little or no effort to capture renewable energy, manage storm water, or reduce wastewater on site, and yet is certified as LEED-Gold. By submitting its buildings for LEED certification, Cornell is promoting an intellectually dubious marketing scheme to validate its sustainable building initiatives.

Discussion points:

There was some interest expressed in organizing a committee or conference to explore how universities such as Cornell might go "beyond LEED." Cornell's own energy goals (30% - 50% lower energy use than currently mandated standards) serve as a model for what sustainability metrics could look like. A recent article in the July 2012 *ASHRAE Journal* ("Measuring Commercial Building Performance") provides protocols that could also be useful. The idea of finding partners for such a discussion was suggested: The Big Ten and Friends Mechanical and Energy Conference (http://big10meconf.unl.edu/) and the Syracuse Center of Excellence (http://www.syracusecoe.org/coe/) were both mentioned as possible venues for such a discussion.

Participants:

i articipants.		
Last Name	First Name	NetID or email
Chambliss	Lauren	elc55@cornell.edu
Fan	Jintu	jf456@cornell.edu
Gucalp	Aylin	abg86@cornell.edu
Hua	Ying	yh294@cornell.edu
Laquatra	Joseph	jl27@cornell.edu
Schember	Helene	hrs6@cornell.edu
Tester	Jeff	jwt54@cornell.edu
Thomas	Jan	jht3@cornell.edu
Warhaft	Zellman	zw16@cornell.edu
Zadeh	Rana	rzadeh@cornell.edu

	Hencey	Brandon	b <u>mh78@cornell.edu</u>
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Regrets:

Last Name	First Name	NetID or email
Chong	Howard	hc757@cornell.edu
Hedge	Alan	ah29@cornell.edu
Joyce	Lanny	wsj1@cornell.edu
Kay	David	dlk2@cornell.edu
Schneider	David	
Wolford	Wendy	www43@cornell.edu
Zehnder	Alan	tz2@cornell.edu

Interest:

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Last Name	First Name	NetID or email
Beyers	Steve	smb75@cornell.edu
Bland	Bert	rrb2@cornell.edu
Clancy	Paulette	pqc1@cornell.edu
Cowen	Todd	eac20@cornell.edu
Gao	Huaizhu	hg55@cornell.edu
George	Al	arg2@cornell.edu
Hanrath	Tobias	th358@cornell.edu
Howe	Rod	rlh13@cornell.edu
Hua	Ying	yh294@cornell.edu
Jack	Elliott	jre15@cornell.edu
Kozlowski	Matthew	mdk39@cornelledu
Lacey	D. Randall	drl4@cornell.edu
McComas	Katherine	kam19@cornell.edu
Nozick	Linda	lkn3@cornell.edu
Pratt	Kevin	kp238@cornell.edu
Pritchard	Sara	sbp65@cornell.edu
Russell-Anelli	Jonathan	jJmr5@cornell.edu
Sachs	Aaron	as475@cornell.edu
Scott	Norm	nrs5@cornell.edu
Travis	Alex	ajt32@cornell.edu