

Living up to expectations

Tenure in building confirms benefits of going green

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When architects and contractors discuss sustainable buildings, the conversation often centers on mechanical components. Air-handling equipment, systems that regulate electrical and water use, and well-insulated ceilings and windows are the obvious targets for efficiency. But when officials at Overcash Demmitt Architects and The McAllister Group talk about their green, 13,000-square-foot building, what they mention is sunshine.

Stephen Overcash designed the building at 2010 S. Tryon St. His company owns and occupies the 5,500-square-foot office condo on the second floor. He says the extensive use of windows and overhead lighting is rarely used. But the savings on power bills is not where his firm experiences the biggest benefit.

"It's been tracked that natural daylighting increases worker productivity by 5% to 20%. It costs me about \$20 per square foot to pay for employee salaries. If you increase their productivity by 5%, that's a big number.

"Natural light puts people in a good mood," Overcash adds. "If each employee stays an extra 15 minutes in the office each day, that translates into six figures of profit each year."

Profits aren't the employees' daily concern — they just like the light. "There's definitely a fresher feel here, and the natural light is a huge component of that," says Annzie Blythe, an interior designer. "It changes your mood a lot. You don't get cabin fever."

That's true of the space downstairs. "It's a light-filled environment that's efficient and comfortable," says Larry McAllister, president at McAllister Group, developer of the CitiSpace project that includes the building. The firm occupies the ground floor.

Lesson learned on certification

The companies registered the building for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. But they decided not to pursue formal certification status, which Overcash says would have cost \$20,000 to \$40,000.

"That's very expensive for a plaque on the wall," he says. "For me, the certification doesn't mean a lot — it's about doing the right thing."

The cost for meeting LEED standards wasn't onerous — the building cost about \$185 per square foot.

But a year and a half after moving into the building, the lack of certification is Overcash's only regret.

"I now advise clients to get the plaque. If they sell it, it's a proven fact a building

The office of Overcash Demmitt Architects has large windows and an open layout to allow sunlight to reach interior spaces. The arrangement boosts productivity and lowers energy costs.



photos courtesy OVERCASH DEMMITT ARCHITECTS



will go for 5% to 10% more if it's LEED-certified."

Is there anything else Overcash regrets? "How can you possibly say anything bad about saving Mother Earth?" he replies.

McAllister is seeking the certification on CitiSpace's fourth structure, now under way. "It wasn't just the dollars — (LEED certification) was harder to do then," he says. "But it's more mainstream now; city inspectors and building code officials are more up to speed on it. It's less costly, and you don't have to research products as much."

Even without certification, McAllister says building green was a smart choice. "It's what we preach to our customers when we do their homes, so it's important that we don't just talk the talk."

The design process began by orienting the building to make the best use of sunlight. That entailed including large window spaces and considering the sun's orbit to minimize glare.

And it meant eliminating private offices, even for top management, to allow

sunlight to penetrate all offices. Separate rooms require more duct work, lighting, wallboard and doors. A large square space is also more economical to heat and cool. Even the conference rooms feature glass doors and walls. Instead of building a separate library, the firm lined the walls with bookshelves.

The open environment also increases collaboration and employee efficiency. Employees can turn around and ask colleagues a question instead of wondering if they are in, walking down the hall to find them or sending an e-mail.

Designer Blythe likes the open environment, but she sometimes wishes for more privacy when making a personal call or working on deadline. But with cell phones, texting and e-mail, that's less of an issue.

Cutting power bills in half

Overcash figures these features, plus a high-efficiency air system, have cut the firm's utility bills in half to about \$5,500 a year. The company also increased the

KEY ACTIONS AND BENEFITS

WHAT GOING GREEN CAN MEAN:

- With an emphasis on conservation in building materials and energy consumption, power bills can be cut in half.
- Reliance on natural light boosts productivity, which increases profits.
- An open layout reduces construction costs for items such as ductwork, walls and doors.
- Going through the LEED certification process costs tens of thousands of dollars for even a small building, but that investment can be recovered when it's sold.

temperature setting this summer and hasn't received any complaints. The air conditioning is turned off on the weekends.

The McAllister space has four offices and a conference room, but the firm still saves on energy. "We're getting a great return on investment," McAllister says. "In an all-electric building, our average bill is \$130 a month for 1,500 square feet."

Restrooms in the architectural office use high-efficiency toilets and waterless urinals, which cut the firm's water use in half. "The toilets are a little nosier, and since my office is right beside the restroom, I hear them. Not a distraction and hardly a sacrifice," Overcash says.

For the architect, simply working in a green building isn't enough. "You need to follow through on your lifestyle," he says. The firm's 23 employees use ceramic mugs, eliminating the need for Styrofoam, and visitors use disposable cups made from sugar-cane fibers. The company buys recycled paper, prints on the back of used paper for in-house purposes, uses terry cloth towels in the kitchen, and orders locally produced beer and wine for functions.

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