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Developers can go green...and prosper! Can't afford not to take a sustainable design approach

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In these days of rising fuel costs and growing concern for the environment, sustainability is no longer an esoteric academic topic, but is now a household topic. Developers have historically shied away from sustainable design, fearing that the premium for green design would outweigh any possible return on their investment. Recent trends demonstrate, however, that in these days of informed consumers, developers can't afford not to take a sustainable design approach to their projects. Additional findings show that the fears of high premiums with little return are mainly unfounded.

One local developer, Jones Lang LaSalle, who has been involved with such notable development projects as Fan Pier, Russia Wharf, NorthPoint, and Bio Sq. (a LEED Certified - Core Shell) has recently been taking sustainable design very seriously. Senior vice president of development, Lisa Serafin, said, "We've increased our focus and made [sustainability] one of our driving initiatives in the past year. A number of our staff is getting LEED-accredited." JLL is a financial and professional services firm specializing in real estate. They offer integrated services delivered by expert teams worldwide to clients seeking increased value by owning, occupying, or investing in real estate. With 2007 global revenue of \$2.7 billion, JLL has approximately 180 offices worldwide and operates in more than 700 cities in 60 countries.Â

As a major player in the global real estate and development market, JLL might ignore sustainability if there were no reasonable return on investment. They have found that not to be the case, however. "Not only is it good practice, but the market is now demanding sustainability," reports Serafin. "Tenants are buying into concepts, such as lower absenteeism, higher productivity, increased staff retention." A prime example in New England is the Genzyme Corporate Headquarters in East Cambridge, where Genzyme, as the primary prospective tenant, requested the developer (not JLL) build it a green building. The developer, and its architect, Benisch, Benisch and Partner, went even further, to design a building that achieved LEED Platinum certification, with significant returns in productivity and energy savings.

For those developers investing in older existing buildings, sustainability is more relevant than ever, with green renovations easily guided by LEED-EB (Existing Buildings). "When older spaces come up for re-tenanting, they come up against new buildings that are sustainable," remarks Serafin, implying that older non-green spaces will get passed over for the greener new kids on the block, unless they enlist in green upgrades.

For a long while, sustainable design in private development was only for developers who were planning to keep the property and lease/rent the space to tenants. Life cycle analyses nearly always favored sustainable design. However, nowadays, even for developers who build and resell, building green is fast becoming a viable economic choice. "How the end user uses the building is important,"

Serafin said. "Buyers will compare built projects against each other. If they are comparing a non-sustainable property against a sustainable property, the sustainable property will get their attention first."

When developing projects that have significant sites, developers are finding that whether they are building to lease, or building to sell, sustainable site design doesn't have to cost them more. "In the landscape, it's not that difficult to orient the building in the right direction," Serafin said. And at NorthPoint, JLL supported an open stormwater management system that followed both best management practices and light impact development (LID) principles. Such systems have been difficult to permit in past years, where regulating agencies would require redundancy, relying on more conventional, proven methodology that was less sustainable, such as closed drainage systems that directly outlet to waterbodies. But that is changing as more LID systems are being implemented. Policy makers and regulatory agencies are getting more aligned. It's now less risky to approve new systems. JLL is happy about this, as these systems have many benefits, some intangible. "Not only do we offer improved water quantity, but also water quality, as sediments settle, and water gets filtered by the designed wetland vegetation, before outletting into the Charles River," said Serafin. "In addition, the open stormwater system integrated into the landscape as a visual amenity, with nice seating and granite blocks, are extra steps that increase the curb appeal with potential commercial tenants and residential buyers."

Just as universal access has become second nature in design and construction, so will sustainable design. Serafin sees other similarities, claiming, "As with universal access, the benefits of sustainability go beyond the anticipated benefits. The general population is beginning to value the benefits not only to the environment, but also to their lives."

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