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In the age of sustainability, your landscape says a lot about your values

September 02, 2009 - Owners Developers & Managers

Not so long ago, when building owners and developers talked about their landscape, they meant their competitive landscape, the economic landscape, even the distinctly unvegetated digital landscape. They rotated in "environment" to give "landscape" time on the bench. But for sure they were clueless about the landscape landscape. Yes, landscape landscape. Landscaping they totally got, but landscape? And how theirs stacked up against the competition was hardly a matter of earth-shattering concern. They were missing the forest through the trees.

Then along came sustainability. What a nightmare! Like it or not, suddenly sustainability was a "hot" issue. Nowadays, no business has any business coming across as scoffing at the idea, not any more. A lot more fretting over one's "carbon footprint" is going on. Sustainable design has even come to high-rise buildings, which seems like a tall order. The longer the shadow, the smaller the carbon footprint? Suddenly, a landscape is more than landscaping, it includes everything outside the building envelope—and often landscaping is only a small part of the total outdoor experience.

In the age of sustainability, your landscape says a lot about your values. For example, your irrigation system may be a resource hog, your lighting may be an energy sink, your use of non-organic pesticides may come with hidden environmental costs, your plants may be invasive species, your paving may be heating up the microclimate, your fancy site materials may have been flown in at vast expense from halfway across the globe. You may not have installed a green roof, let alone a green wall. Your world of choices is suddenly being tagged as a laundry list of environmental no-nos. Just not done. Before long, all our carbon footprints will be available online in Google Earth for all the world to google and ogle over.

The question that owners and developers now have to ask is whether that outdoor landscape experience thing is winning new friends, being a good neighbor, keeping customers, adding to worker productivity, sending the right message about your attitude toward sustainability, and doing the right thing.

The days of denying the reality of global climate change are so yesterday. The fact is, it is getting hot in here, and not just because of the cars we drive, but the buildings we operate. When I spent a year in our Shanghai office in 2007, the media was awash with stories on how energy-inefficient construction and building operation were in China. I was shocked at the number of SUVs and Hummers, and posh neighborhoods of palatial villas with estate style outdoor entertainment areas, swimming pools and spas, the trappings of China's rapid growth into a consumer economy in its own right. The timing was perfect to start talking seriously about sustainability, as China was moving

to a leading position, not just in its export of inexpensive goods but in the generation of costly greenhouse gases. But who were we in the U.S. to lecture them about doing the right thing unless we were doing it ourselves?

We at AGER take that very seriously, since we are living the "flat world" described in Tom Friedman's best seller. Our office never closesâ€”when Shanghai is asleep, Boston is at work. That may be fascinatingly hyperactive from a production standpoint, but its true value-added is that we are in the business of leveraging best management practices for our clients worldwide, aspiring to sustainability through inspired design. We are doing our part to spread sustainable design in China and globally.

If anyone tells you that sustainability has to sacrifice on design aesthetics, that it is a tradeoff, trade up. It just ain't so. Here at AGER, fusion design means not just melding sustainable best practices and design creativity, it means thinking outside the east-versus-west, us-versus-them box. That excitement is what keeps the Boston office up at nightâ€”that, and the twelve-hour time difference with China.

Market leaders who have done their homework realize going green is not only doing the right thing, it can save money. Energy and resource efficient operations can more than offset the modest construction cost premium in a matter of years. As energy prices soar, so much faster the payback.

Fall is the perfect time to assess your landscape to see if it passes muster, and commit to doing your part to reduce your carbon footprint, one footstep at a time.

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