

# A shift to green building

## Montreal's GKC now finds it easier to sell clients on sustainability

BY LYNN MOORE, THE GAZETTE   APRIL 9, 2009 6:39 AM



Jerry Coviensky (left) and Richard Kaplin of architect firm GKC say green buildings translate into happier workers.

**Photograph by:** DAVE SIDAWAY, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

Windows and fresh air. Cube-farm drones - also known as office workers - can't get enough. Nor can those who labour in warehouses or industrial buildings. Everybody likes a workplace bathed in natural light and filled with air that hasn't been depleted by colleagues or overheated by equipment.

Fortunately, employers are learning there are bottom-line advantages to providing such environments for workers, according to two Montreal architects who focus on building sustainable and LEED-certifiable buildings for commercial and industrial use.

"Our selling job has gotten easier and easier," said Jerry Coviensky, who credited Al Gore's environmental campaign and increased public awareness about sustainability for the shift in thinking.

"It's almost being taken for granted now (by clients) that projects will be green or sustainable."

Coviensky and partner Richard Kaplin estimate that 75 to 80 per cent of GKC's recent projects involve buildings that will be seeking LEED certification.

"Not all clients go for LEED certification, but one of the benefits of that third-party review is when they want to resell the building ... they can show that it really did meet that sustainability goal," Kaplin said.

GKC, which traces its roots back 50 years in Montreal, is among a growing number of architectural firms that say a solid business case can be made for green buildings. While their biggest payback may be energy efficiencies, a less recognized benefit is related to the quality of the workplace environment.

Simply put, green buildings translate into happier, healthier environments for workers and improve productivity. They feature better air, more light, less drafts and fewer foul smells from paints and carpeting.

"There have been a lot of studies in the States on this and they have seen productivity increases of 20 to 30 per cent and less absenteeism," Coviensky said.

A 2005 report prepared for Industry Canada by the Canada Green Building Council cites a 2003 study of office workers in California that found an increase in daylight illumination levels increased productivity by 13 per cent.

Office workers with something pleasant to look at had the best performances. Workers were found to perform up to 25 per cent better on tests of mental function and memory recall when they had the best possible view, compared to those with no view.

And a study of about 3,700 workers in the eastern U.S. found absenteeism was 35 per cent lower in offices with higher ventilation rates, a common trait of green buildings, according to the report.

One fellow who knows green buildings work for the people who work in them - as well as for the bottom line - is Simon Bérubé, the senior director of engineering for Sobeys Quebec.

Bérubé, who is responsible for about \$250 million a year in development, is overseeing the building of Sobeys fourth LEED building in Quebec.

The company's new 140,000 square-foot distribution facility in Trois Rivières - designed by GKC in conjunction with Blouin Tardif Architects - will be the first LEED-certified refrigerated warehouse in Canada and is in the running for a 2009 Award of Excellence in Architecture by Ordre des architectes du Québec.

"We put windows in the warehouse, which is rare to start with, but in a refrigerated warehouse it is even more rare because the last thing you want is to bring sunlight into a refrigerated space," Coviensky said.

But Bérubé and his team insisted on a "nice space for their workers," so a special type of high-performance insulated glass was used.

The building, which features a spacious cafeteria, outdoor terrace, radiant floors in the offices and its own water-treatment system, proves the merits of green buildings, Bérubé said.

When Dollarama Group LP, Canada's largest dollar store operator, built its new head office and distribution centre in the Town of Mount Royal, the company wanted sustainable features but not LEED certification, said senior executive Neil Rossy, who has worked with GKC on other projects.

The new 80,000 square-foot head office, which features a 15-metre-high atrium, is the best yet, Rossy said.

In addition to the airiness of the open-concept design, high ceilings and lots of natural light, it is heated and cooled with a geothermal system.

The company does not keep absenteeism statistics, but Rossy said he has had many positive comments from employees.

"Speaking for myself - and I work 80 hours a week - it's fantastic," he said.

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#### LEED Measures Green Practices

LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a points-based ratings system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council that measures green building and development practices.

Ten years old, it requires third-party verification and documentation of each stage of building. There are four certification levels: Certified, Silver, Gold and Platinum.

LEED evaluates such aspects as site sustainability, water efficiency, indoor air quality, energy conservation, materials and resources.

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