

Title: Should Cornell buildings be LEED-certified?

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Abstract: 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 guidelines). 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 in 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.

Useful links: <http://www.sustainablecampus.cornell.edu/buildings/initiative.cfm>
<http://www.ochshorndesign.com/cornell/writings/milstein-critique/sustainability.html>