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"GREEN CONFERENCING: IS IT WORTH THE TIME & MONEY?"

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For the past five years I've made a professional leap into conferencing. It's expensive. It's exhausting. But I have found it worthwhile, and I think it's beneficial to assess its value---a kind of Life Cycle Cost Analysis and Value Engineering approach which most design professionals readily understand.

What I am referring to as a "green" conference is one focused entirely on issues of sustainable design, and embracing all design+build professions, NGO's and businesses. The two biggest are **Environdesign**, held in Spring, and **Greenbuild** in Fall. Environdesign held its 10th Annual in Toronto April 25-27, 2006; Greenbuild, an event born of the U.S. Green Building Council, holds its fifth international in Denver November 14-18, 2006. In the past five years intensive "green" seminar

programs have been imbedded in trade fairs like Neocon or ICFF, but they cannot be compared to either Environdesign or Greenbuild in educational value. It's all about intensity.

Of the two, **Environdesign is the pioneer** and the premier inspirational conference; it has always been a compass to guide designers in developing intelligent, effective attitudes toward global environmental safety. It has been the idealistic "heart" of the professional green movement, appealing to educators, environmentalists, corporate CEO's and scientists, as well as professionals in the design-build industries. William McDonough, Michael Braungart, Janine Benyus, Ray Anderson, David Orr, and other seminal thinkers and speakers have been keynoters; until 2006, its Product Learning Center was extensive and excellent. Its book display has been alluring for any bibliophile who wants to develop a library shelf on sustainability. It's early growth was exponential: from 100 to 1200 in three years, approximately. It is not, however, huge. It has plateaued at a maximum of about 2500 attendees. Perhaps interest in basics has reached its limit; the conference seems to be dwindling.

Greenbuild is huge. During its first year, in Austin, Texas, the organizers frantically sought accommodation for more than 2500, which number increased during the conference, itself. A relative newcomer, Greenbuild is growing much larger and faster than Environdesign. In 2005 it claimed about 10,000 attendees. Its trade exhibition component boasts over 700 vendors expected in 2006. It is sponsored by the U. S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit coalition of more than 6,000 private companies, nonprofits and governmental agencies

As the mastodon in the room, however, Greenbuild is impressive but impersonal. On a comprehensive, educational level, big is not better. It has seemed to me to be more hard-edged, more directed toward architects and engineers than designers, and a can-do, how-to, approach, rather than aiming toward capturing hearts and minds. You might want to counteract the thrill of pure population density by checking your New Yorker's Coping Manual. I've read that they expect 15,000 to attend this year.

The development of **L.E.E.D.** standards grew out of the U.S.G.B.C. and is a major component of Greenbuild: 15 L.E.E.D. workshops and seminars are offered in 2006. Because of Greenbuild's large scale, there is a large-scale sharing of information and ideas. During the November 2005 conference in Atlanta, attendees

produced "[the New Orleans Principles](#)", which address the issues of rebuilding New Orleans post-Katrina. The protocol was accomplished by a quartet of monster charrettes involving over 200 firms and people. It took over two months to collate and present for public engorgement.

The cost of attending one of these "green" conferences is not so much in the fees alone, which for any conference can vary from \$100-\$1500, but for the accommodations and travel. Most meals are included in the basic fee, and that first hurdle is often cut dramatically by registering early. Students may pay as little as \$100, or nothing if they work as service volunteers. This year, Envirodesign cost \$595 for 2 ½ days, less 20% for educators and students, and 15% less for government employees. Each conference charges less than 1/5 the full cost for partial programs, and passes for just the product exhibit alone cost as little as \$25. Special pre- and post-conference workshops, such as L.E.E.D., and site tours cost extra, from \$35 to \$475 each.

What do you get for all that money?

- **EDUCATION: Workshops and seminars** with a wide choice of topic tracks: at least 4 sessions per day, replete with expert-led show-and-tell
- **CEU'S GALORE** in a neat bunch---often enough for a few years' credits as stipulated by your license, re-certification rules, or professional organization
- A Product Learning Center [**i.e. intensely eco-friendly trade fair**] where attendees can view, and compare, hands-on, huge numbers of new green materials, products, and technological advances, obtain samples, talk to knowledgeable reps
- Extensive **book market** displays of relevant works on sustainable design to purchase or order; Bibliophiles are forewarned to take a tranquilizer.
- **Pre- and post-conference workshops** that explore sustainable design practices in comprehensive detail, such as L.E.E.D.
- Half-day and whole-day guided **Site Tours** of some of the local area's greatest green buildings, with plenty of chances to photograph; wear comfortable shoes
- **Networking:** at parties, special events and communal mealtimes, sitting at round tables, seated opposite at least nine other people you don't know' and have to talk to with your mouth full
- **Opportunity to have enlightening conversations** with accomplished thinkers and doers; many an epiphany has occurred under these conditions, and, if you are a teacher, it can't hurt you
- **Opportunity to listen** to the experiences, thoughts and opinions of hundreds of people at least as smart as you are, from all over the world

After a heavy dose of all these goodies for five years, I can honestly say that my top **favorites** are definitely the **site tours**, which are usually phenomenal trips, even to off-shore islands or other communities, with lunch and comradesies thrown in; second, the **product show and book markets**. Next, the dialogues and presentations, both inspirational and factual. The intensity of input puts me, I confess, back into freshman mode, aiming my antlers into those headlights.

Summing up, "green conferencing" is an efficient way designers can learn how to use their skills to help correct global environmental problems. We might even say that a true definition of "Intelligent Design" is that it's "green".