ACSF Topical Lunch (10/5/12)

Title: Should Cornell Buildings Be LEED-Certified?

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Brief Summary:

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 is 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.

Discussion points:

There was some interest expressed in organizing a committee or conference to explore how universities such as Cornell might go “beyond LEED.” Cornell’s own energy goals (30% - 50% lower energy use than currently mandated standards) serve as a model for what sustainability metrics could look like. A recent article in the July 2012 *ASHRAE Journal* (“Measuring Commercial Building Performance”) provides protocols that could also be useful. The idea of finding partners for such a discussion was suggested: The Big Ten and Friends Mechanical and Energy Conference (http://big10meconf.unl.edu/) and the Syracuse Center of Excellence (http://www.syracusecoe.org/coe/) were both mentioned as possible venues for such a discussion.

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