

EXography: LEED certification doesn't guarantee energy efficiency, analysis shows

BY LUKE ROSIAK | OCTOBER 29, 2013 AT 5:15 AM

When the number of LEED points awarded to properties is plotted against the greenhouse gas emissions figures given to those same properties, the opposite relationship you'd expect emerges. The more greenhouse gases emitted, the more likely the property was to have gotten accolades from LEED.

Source: US Green Building Council, PlaNYC benchmarking scores

A high rating in the prestigious LEED certification program may bear little relation to actual greenhouse gas emissions of New York office towers, according to a *Washington Examiner* analysis.

The *Examiner* compared actual energy use statistics collected by New York City officials to the certifications distributed by the LEED group.

The LEED certification — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — is a product of the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council.

Planners gauge a building's power usage using a metric called "energy use intensity," where a lower number indicates less energy use per square foot. It's measured in British thermal units.

Half of all New York office buildings used 74.2 kBtus per gross square foot or more, New York's data showed. Of buildings that were LEED-certified, half used 82.4 or more — meaning LEED-certified buildings actually performed worse than buildings in general, according to the *Examiner* analysis.

The MetLife building, for example, received LEED gold certification less than a year ago. But data released this month reveal that its greenhouse gas emissions in tons of carbon dioxide per square foot rank the facility among the worst in all of New York, making it the 113th most-polluting office building out of 1,170.

This month, New York City published data on the energy use of all large properties as part of an aggressive environmental initiative.

The *Examiner* took a list of LEED office buildings published by the USGBC and matched them by address to the city-published list.

In 2009, LEED certified 1221 Avenue of the Americas, a media hub that real estate agents tout as "built as part of an extension to the Rockefeller Center in the 1970s ... it offers 2.5 million square feet of office space, and recently became one of the largest LEED certified existing buildings in New York."

But New York's data show that the property performs abysmally, with a 108.7 EIU and an EnergyStar rating of 67, which places it at the bottom of the barrel against all office buildings citywide.

Down the street at the UBS building, 1285 Avenue of the Americas, garnered a "silver" LEED certification even though it fares even worse, with an EnergyStar score of 66.

The 46-story Hearst Tower, built in 2006, has polyethylene tubing embedded in the floors that circulates water for cooling in the summer and heating in the winter, and it got reams of press for its unusual and presumably effective environmental measures. LEED awarded it its gold standard.

But the tubing doesn't seem to help with the electricity costs. The building got an EnergyStar score of 74 — significantly worse than the majority of office buildings in New York — and scored below the average NYC building in greenhouse emissions, too.

"Greenhouse gas emissions and water usage, that's the heart and soul. If they're not delivering on that, the rest is just fluff," said Jon Entine, a research fellow at George Mason University who advises companies on environmental sustainability.

USGBC pointed out that LEED applicants earn points towards certification for a huge array of activities, such as installing bike racks or using recyclable material in their carpets.

After paying a fee in the thousands of dollars for review, the building receives a rating that can lead to tax credits and is often touted in marketing materials.

"LEED is a holistic approach to designing, operating and maintaining buildings," USGBC spokeswoman Marisa Long said in an email. "You have to look at all the factors."

But the *Examiner's* review indicated that LEED may have piled on so many tangential credits that the fundamentals are diluted, and that certification has no bearing or even a negative bearing on how much power and water New York's office buildings churn through.

"You assume a LEED certificate means more than checking a lot of boxes, but sometimes it doesn't give you a necessarily informative picture," Entine said.

"People have learned how they can design their buildings in a way that becomes a marketing tool. It's a form of greenwashing."

LEED-CERTIFIED OFFICE BUILDINGS COMPARED TO ALL OFFICE BUILDINGS IN NYC

On the following charts, LEED properties--represented by dots--are plotted against all buildings of the same type in NYC, represented by the gray bars, where the black box is the median.

