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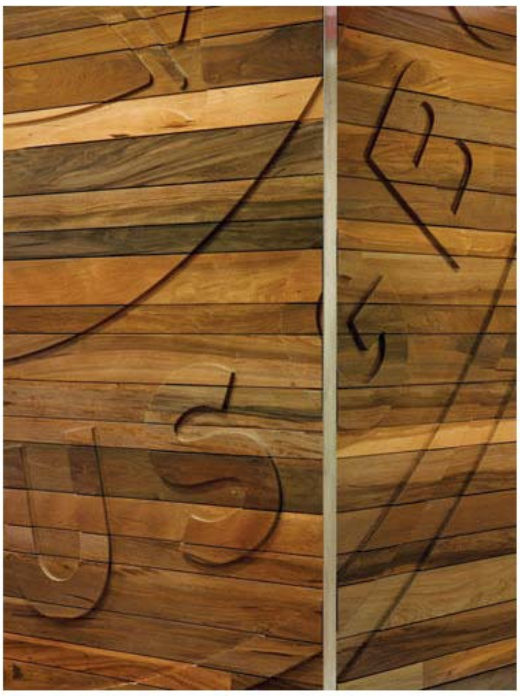
Ultimate Client

After designing offices for some of the leading environmental groups in the country, Envision Design takes on its biggest challenge yet: creating a new headquarters for the U.S. Green Building Council that puts the organization's ideas—and ideals—into action.

By Suzanne LaBarre



RECLAIMED GUMWOOD
TIMELESS TIMBERS
ASHLAND, WISCONSIN
Pulled from the bottom of the Tennessee River, the wood has been third-party certified by SCS as being 100 percent recovered submerged lumber and containing no chemicals, adhesives, or additives or any kind.
Eric Laignel/courtesy Envision

It doesn't feel green. The Eero Saarinen Womb chairs in the lobby, the sparkling terrazzo floors under your feet, the crisp white paint on the walls, glass everywhere—and more glass. Here in the new Washington, D.C., headquarters of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), corporate pomp is at high tide. If not for the oversize logo carved into wood at the entrance like a medallion, the office could easily be mistaken for the cool recesses of a fashion magazine.

Of course, *Vogue* wouldn't have 500-year-old salvaged timber as wall decor. Nor would it have lighting that consumes just less than half a watt per square foot. And it would most definitely not have, on an otherwise bare wall behind a cubicle pod in the middle of the office, a soy-inked outline of an oak tree made up entirely of inspirational quotes. (One leaf, falling from a branch, reads: "'To move the world, we must first move ourselves' —Socrates.") The space, for all its studied sleekness, retains plenty of the USGBC's cheery, green soul.

It's a $9 million aesthetic, and it tells you everything you need to know about where the green-building movement is today and where it's headed. Since its inception 16 years ago, the USGBC has become, rather sweepingly, the preeminent dispenser of sustainable-design mores; its chief commodity, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building-certification program, is the "benchmark of green," as Bill Walsh, executive director of the Healthy Building Network, says. Dicey times have forced some nonprofits to downsize, others to shutter altogether, but the council is expanding at such a clip that it out-grew its old 25,000-square-foot office two and a half years after the paint had dried. The new headquarters, housed in an undistinguished 1975 office building on L Street, ushers in a fresh era of discretionary architecture, in which renovated commercial interiors supplant from-the-ground-up construction—the ultimate act of recycling. More important, the project is the first slated for LEED Platinum certification under the USGBC's strict new rating system, despite being three times larger—and decidedly slicker—than its predecessor. It's a testament to the organization's fortitude and the resonance of its mission. If LEED is indeed the benchmark of green, and surely it is, then the council's tailored digs signal a shift in green building itself.

Such an undertaking demanded the greatest mark of maturity: playing nice with others. Gone is the age of the starchitect, the heroic megalomaniac, conducting a glass-and-steel symphony of his own composition. He's been tossed in the dustbin alongside the masters of the universe, the relics of a profligate (if nonsingular) era. Taking the lead, sustainable design has made a fetish of efficiency, preferring a team of specialists to a solitary genius. The USGBC gathered an ensemble of green-building sages, with the architect Kendall Wilson, of D.C.'s Envision Design, holding the baton. Marrying their ideas, they transformed a couple of gutted floors into a thoroughly sustainable workplace—a demonstration not just of the sophistication of green building today but of a fresh way of practicing architecture. "What's unique about this project is that it really was an integrated design process," Wilson says. "It doesn't happen a lot because the architect's pride is a bit at stake, you know? It requires an architectural team that's willing to drop that and say, 'Let's figure out the best way to do this.'"

KART CHAIR
VECTA
GRAND PRAIRIE, TEXAS
The chair was selected in large part because of its practicality. The USGBC conference room is used for a number of different purposes (lectures, dining, as a boardroom), and these chairs can be efficiently stored as needed. The Kart Chair contains 41 percent recycled content by weight, and its materials are completely recyclable. It's certified by SCS as Indoor Advantage Gold for indoor air quality and upholstered in 100 percent wool.
Eric Laignel/courtesy Envision

Wilson marches about the office, futzing constantly. It's early April and D.C.'s unfathomably gorgeous cherry blossoms embower the streets. Wilson is on the fifth floor of 2101 L Street in the downtown business district, grumbling. The Eames chairs are in the wrong place. Someone moved the ottomans. And what is a black projector doing in this white, white conference room? "There's a limit to what you can control," he says, a little exasperated. He could be anywhere from 35 to 55 (he's 52), and in his pressed slate suit, he could easily pass for a K Street sharper. In fact, Wilson is the ne plus ultra of sustainable nonprofit interiors, having designed for the Environmental Defense Fund, the World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International. "It's like having a kid," he goes on, averting his eyes from a misplaced molded-plywood seat, "and telling him, 'Don't go out and party.'"

Ten years ago, there weren't many eco-friendly Eames chairs to fret over. Wilson opened Envision Design in 1999 with Diana Horvat, his business partner. Their inaugural project was Greenpeace's headquarters—a tricky assignment at a time when green building was more an idea than an industry. Wilson recalls the group's message to him: "We give a lot of people a lot of shit. So they're going to be pointing back at us, saying, 'Why didn't you do this in your own office?'" Though he'd never tackled a sustainable commercial interior, and in terms of materials, pickings were pretty slim, he managed to track down enough green swag to silence the antagonists. Awash in crayon colors, the place had plenty of spunk, if not much elegance, perhaps a result of the recycled yogurt containers used for countertops.

Since then, green building has rapidly evolved. Seen through the monocle of the American Institute of Architects' Top Ten Green Projects awards, started in 1997, a sort of ugly-duckling narrative unfolds. The first winners were nature centers and rehabs, with the occasional school; when they weren't grossly under-designed, they were rank studies in brown. Fast forward to 2009: an airy affordable-housing complex with rooftop photovoltaic cells in San Jose, California, shares the platform with a transparent office building in Seattle that looks as though it were torn from a reel of Jacques Tati's *Play Time*. "Early award winners had a closer kinship to the solar buildings of the seventies than they did to good modern design," says Henry Siegel, former chair of the AIA Committee on the Environment, which administers the award. "That's completely disappeared. Now it's, How can you do a strong contemporary design that integrates these metrics rather than tacks them on as hardware?"

Like any social movement, green building owes its rise to a calculus of factors: policy changes in which states and cities adopted rigorous building codes; manufacturing ad-vances that spawned recyclable carpets and Greenguard-certified furniture; and a public that finally decided to give a hoot, thanks to majordomos like Al Gore and Ed Mazria. The USGBC

has been a major actor. LEED was formed in 1999 to give the construction industry a rewards system of sorts for building green. In 2005, a little more than a thousand projects were registering annually; by 2008, the figure had ballooned to nearly 9,000. It wasn't the world's first green-building index (that honor goes to the U.K.'s Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method), and it certainly isn't perfect (architects kvetch about it the way drivers bemoan the DMV), but it remains the only one to engage the business realm, and for this reason it has hurtled past the competition, handing down design standards like Mosaic law. "LEED really upped the ante for green building," Siegel says. "Everyone complains about LEED, but there's no debate that it has been transforming in terms of demand." So it was only natural that the USGBC's office would stand as a monument to the very movement the group helped advance.

USGBC's president, Rick Fedrizzi, had an uncomplicated vision. He wanted classic modern furniture, light everywhere, and crispness. And it had to be corporate—very corporate. Not such an odd request when you consider the organization's enterprising provenance. A germ of an idea in the early '90s, it was intended to help manufacturers cut costs on federal building projects through energy efficiency. It was briefly called the U.S. Green Manufacturers Council. (The "U.S." qualifier was intended to give it a link, however misleading, to the public sphere, which explains why the USGBC is still frequently mistaken for a government agency.) To broaden its appeal, the organization launched as the U.S. Green Building Council, opening its membership to stakeholders across the building industry, from environmental groups to energy companies. Businesses, though, have remained its favored patrons, and from the beginning, the emphasis was on "presenting a corporate image," David Gottfried, a cofounder, recalls. "There was no question that Ken was the designer for us," Fedrizzi says. (The USGBC also interviewed HOK, the Smith Group, Gensler, and Perkins + Will.) "He has a very sophisticated look. And he's really effective at communicating what we're about."

Wilson came to think about the space as a series of "environmental stories"—episodes of sustainability that, taken together, would illustrate a moral about virtuous design. He brings up *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's latest save-the-world treatise on global warming. "His whole thing is thousands of tiny things," Wilson says. "That's like this project." Put another way, to design a truly sustainable interior, it takes a village—or at least a team of building wonks willing to check their self-regard.

They started with the site. The USGBC wanted an existing structure both to save cash and because, as Fedrizzi says, "there's something inherently right about recycling an old building." Wilson's wife, Sally, a real estate consultant who serves as the global director of environmental strategy for the megacorp CB Richard Ellis, negotiated a "green lease," a document that allows the space to live up to LEED standards. A low-slung edifice that had been gutted and renovated in 2007, it wasn't the group's first choice, but the price was right and the location ideal. It is less than half a mile of the organization's old Perkins + Will–designed offices and of Envision Design, so everything from the planning phase to the move itself was walkable. A bonus, according to one USGBC staffer: "Everyone knows the place to go for happy hour already."

Early on, Wilson marshaled the mechanical engineers, GHT Limited, eager to include them in design charrettes. He had been grappling with how to flatten the building's inherent hierarchy (occasioned by envy-producing floor-to-ceiling glass) and considered pushing desks about eight feet from the perimeter so that everyone got a window and no one got a window—a small act of workplace socialism. The engineers then floated an idea: Why not make peripheral areas colder in the winter and hotter in the summer? "The most energy-intensive space to heat and cool is the perimeter," says Paul O'Brien, president of GHT. "Why are we conditioning this space if no one is sitting there?" The temperature disparities would barely rate a shiver or a bead of sweat, and they would slash the overall energy consumption by 5 percent per degree. Thus, the office's "eco-corridor."

Lighting the place proved daunting, with great potential for energy savings and failure in equal measure. "We tried to wring out every watt," Wilson says. "We'd get people from USGBC—Brendan Owens [vice president of LEED technical development] —and go through, credit by credit, asking 'What are we going to do?' We get to lighting, and Brendan says, 'We need to cut our lighting in half.' And Rod"—Letonja, the project architect—"and I are looking at each other thinking, I can see it now. We'll be walking through the space, showing it off, and it'll look like a cave. How the hell are we ever going to be able to do this?"

They recruited the sustainable-lighting consultants Clanton & Associates, late of LEED projects for Oberlin College and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, where they emphasized visual comfort at every turn. Together, they tossed about ideas for reducing electrical lighting without making employees feel like they were holed up in Tut's tomb. They

settled on Convia, a universal-control system from Herman Miller that senses natural light and occupancy levels and adjusts ceiling fluorescents (and even temperature) accordingly. An occupied cubicle on a sunny day will see little artificial light; at night, it'll have plenty. Light-colored carpet along the eco-corridor further brightens the space, and when the sun grows too sharp, automatic shades from MechoShade roll down. As a result, the lighting consumes about half a watt per square foot, which is 52 percent below the baseline of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers and more than meets LEED's new requirements.

Not that every collaboration worked perfectly. "From a design standpoint, the USGBC looked at the office as being very experimental," Wilson says, speaking generally. "They're the USGBC. They have to show leadership, so we needed to try things out. Some might work, some might not." Consider the environmental prints posted on various office cubicles. Wilson coordinated with the biophilia expert Judith Heerwagen and the graphics consultants Shaw Jelveh Design to break up a boundless sea of desks with photographs of wood, honeycomb, flowers, and clouds—the kind you might find at IKEA. But they're being scaled back after employees complained about feeling walled in or put off by the imagery. (One person was particularly offended by a rather biomorphic conch shell.)

The true sex appeal, of course, is in the furnishings and the finishes—the details that make 2101 L Street the temple of green design Fedrizzi so lusted after. Step off the elevator and hang a left, and panels of 200- to 500-year-old gumwood recovered from the Tennessee River dress the walls. The accent recurs in the lobby, behind a pair of orange (Greenguard-certified) Womb chairs, on the USGBC medallion, which is pressed behind an open stairwell. Take another left into the anteroom (still white), and the wood repeats again, dividing glassy conference rooms that face east over central D.C. The only other decor here is a set of candy-colored Italian wool ottomans arranged haphazardly for casual seating. The ottomans, Wilson says, were "a moment of weakness"—the rare flourish that doesn't have an environmental story. Or maybe it's part of the broader story Wilson and the USGBC are trying to tell: green design doesn't have to be oblivious to aesthetics.

For employees, adjusting to the formal decor of 2101 L Street hasn't been easy. The USGBC might want to project an image of sober-minded maturity, but around the cubicles, even 30 is old. The USGBC and Shaw Jelveh worked to inject some personality into the place, arranging variegated images of LEED projects in a conference room; elsewhere, a world map pinpoints the organization's chapters. But the quote wall is perhaps the most faithful barometer of office culture. Submitted by the council's 196 employees, the quotes are taken from Jesus Christ ("Whatever thy hand findest to do, do it with all thy heart") and his secular equivalent ("'Do, or do not. There is no try.' —Yoda"). They are from the author of The Green Collar Economy ("It's time to stop borrowing and start building …") and the mouth of a sworn enemy ("'The job is ours and the job must be done. If not by us, who? If not now, when?'" —Ronald Reagan"). There are seven from Mahatma Gandhi; six from Frank Lloyd Wright; five each from Barack Obama, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and E. E. Cummings; four from John Muir; and three from Dr. Seuss. Other offices have mountain retreats and trust falls. The USGBC has its quote wall. "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars," goes one quote from Oscar Wilde, caught in a rare instance of sounding more like Sacheen Littlefeather.

Which prompts the question: Does a corporate look suit an organization whose employees find inspiration in Van Jones? Or is that disconnect precisely the point? As much as the aesthetic seems to belie the institution's character, it's in lockstep with its mission—to spread green building far and wide. Corporations are among the last frontiers and, by dint of their size, the ideal candidates to usher in change. With its new office, the USGBC is turning itself into a billboard for the idea that green business practices extend beyond a few recycling bins and a company-sponsored Earth Day picnic; they penetrate all corners of office life, from carpeting and desk lamps to the very process by which the space is designed. Efficiency and collaboration are the new watchwords, ideas that both green activists and corporate suits can embrace. "We're putting together technologies that are already in existence but have never been quite assembled in this way," Wilson says. "We're not a hundred percent sure how everything is going to turn out, but we want to be able to tell this story to all kinds of people." The lesson is right there on the wall: "To move the world, we must first move ourselves."