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LEED and Sausage Making

Since LEED for Schools came out, there have been complaints about the acoustical credits. But the complainers don't know what went into deliberations.

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By Thom Mullins, CTS

When I think of phrases that describe the legislative and political processes, two specifically come to mind. Otto von Bismarck once noted, "Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made." That's because politics is the art of compromise, the other oft-stated observation I think about. Whether we're talking about getting elected, making laws, or crafting guidelines, we're always confronted with the difference between what is and what is best. And that's been on my mind lately since the release of the LEED for Schools rating system, particularly as it pertains to acoustical credits. I've been surprised at the number of conversations I've overheard or participated in regarding the recommended standard. Most of the time, I've listened to complaints and thoughts on what should be done to improve it. One person even said the requirements were so minimal they were useless, and that LEED for Schools should never have been released.

Now I need to be careful here. Daniel Bruck, who chaired the U.S. Green Building Council committee that spent 18 months working with design professionals to develop the guidelines, is the owner of BRC Acoustics & Technology Consulting—the firm I work for. And in the interest of full disclosure, I've heard some of the background behind the committee's discussions. So while my column could be seen as a defense of the committee's work, think of it instead as a cautionary tale of how sausage gets made, of how to blend the ingredients so you'll sell the most sausage, and of how to lay the groundwork for better sausage in the future. LEED for Schools, to steal a phrase, represents the art of the deal.

The new LEED guidelines refer to ANSI S12.60-2002, Acoustical Performance Criteria, Design Requirements and Guidelines for Schools, as it pertains to reverberation times in classrooms. This original standard came out of investigations done in the 1980s and 1990s on the impact of acoustics on learning in elementary school classrooms. Research found a high correlation between lower performance in schools, long reverberation times in classrooms, and higher ambient noise levels in these environments. That other committee was tasked with creating criteria that would address those issues, and the resulting ANSI standard became the basis for similar standards in the state of Washington, as well as others, in new construction.



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Fast-forward to two years ago, when LEED certification was not as established as it is today. Most of the credits given out pertained to the use of sustainable materials and building practices, natural ventilation, and reducing energy consumption. Acoustics hadn't been considered in any depth, but there was a growing appreciation that sustainable buildings needed to address the issue—and soon. The most common complaint I've heard about LEED-certified buildings has been the poor acoustical environment.

So Dr. Bruck raised his hand and volunteered to assemble a committee to address the issue. The most obvious need at the time was that of an acoustical credit in schools. It was also seen as the easiest to tackle because of the aforementioned ANSI standard. A slam dunk, right?

Unnatural Instincts

We like things quiet around our office. I'd bet the only places quieter than the average acoustical consultant's office are a cemetery and a funeral home. We've learned that in order to increase concentration at work and employee satisfaction with the environment, we need to reduce extraneous noise, absorb unwanted sounds, and adjust the background noise levels so that people can work more effectively. All these things, by the way, are antithetical to the current design directions dictated by LEED. Natural ventilation and lots of glass to improve lighting are our foes.

The noise isolation issues are at the crux of the complaints I've heard about the new LEED guidelines. The quieter the environment, the easier it is for students to focus and retain what they're learning. When Dan's committee started making recommendations about classroom treatments, it wasn't difficult to get agreement on reverberation times from outsiders. For the most part, architects knew what kind of treatment was needed, where it should go, and how much to apply. The real issue became isolation from outside noise sources. And here the committee ran into a number of issues.

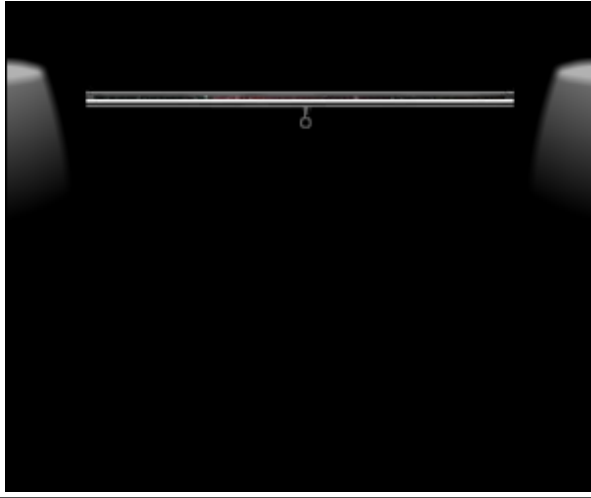
For one, not all school districts have noise standards, even in areas where noise impacts can be high, such as under airplane flight paths. Under certain circumstances, it would be expensive to achieve acceptable classroom ambient noise levels in new construction, and even more so in remodeled facilities. Then there was widespread reluctance from the architectural community to hire an acoustical consultant who could tell them exactly how the roof and wall structure needed to be built to achieve the desired classroom noise levels.

Still, the committee persisted and now we've arrived where we are now. At a recent meeting of the Acoustical Society of America in Portland, Ore., green acoustics was front-and-center. Bruck says the panel discussion was well attended, but there were some disparaging remarks made by some attendees about the LEED for Schools guidelines. What was notable, not surprisingly, was that the comments came from people who were not involved in the sausage-making process. Before the release of the new guidelines, the USGBC invited comments. Of the thousands received, only eight were about acoustics (four of those people were in the room in Portland). Moving forward, there will be opportunities to fine-tune all the LEED standards. Lesson learned: Get involved.

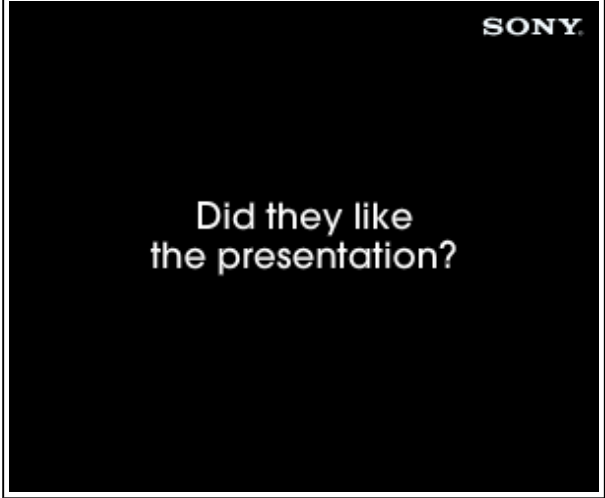
It's rare for us to have the long-term vision needed to achieve worthy goals, either politically or socially. Making sausage is messy, and it's driven by experimentation with different flavors. It involves compromise and the ability to work together. Let's not despise the day of small beginnings.

Thom Mullins is senior consultant with BRC Acoustics & Technology Consulting in Seattle.

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