

Stephen's Healthy Housing Column

Green Building Certification and MCS Does It Help?

- Stephen Collette, BBEC, LEED AP



Stephen Collette is a Certified Building Biology Environmental Consultant (BBEC). This lengthy certification analyses the built environment and how it impacts people's health. Stephen was a natural builder for 5 years specializing in straw bale construction. Stephen has an engineering background and training which enables him to understand the various processes occurring within the home and how they can interact. Applying these skills and knowledge to the standard home and small office enables Your Healthy House to find the reasons for poor indoor air quality and to create solutions to help create your healthy house.

Stephen Collette is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design - Accredited Professional (LEED AP), which allows Stephen to use the Canada Green Building Council's guidelines and method to ensure a quantitative approach to building green.

Green building certifications are permeating all aspects of construction, in residential, commercial, medical, institutional, and industrial. It's the newest, latest, and greatest. Everyone seems to consider anything green and certified to be the best thing since sliced bread appeared on the market. How do these ratings really work towards making buildings safer for people with MCS or other environmental illnesses? Should people with MCS be building to a certain Green Building Standard, as many of their friends and families may be recommending?

How Green Building Standards Came About

With the growing interest in the environment, people were trying to build with more thoughtful and respectful considerations to the impact the building was having on the environment. Some people in some places were doing something to remedy this, while others in other places were doing other things to remedy that and there was no real consistency. Local green building guidelines were developed in areas where environmental impact was being felt, such as Austin, Texas where water conservation was a priority, or in Oregon where rain water getting into walls was important. Other places

were concerned about energy consumption and the rising fuel costs to operate commercial buildings (think schools and office towers). So many people in many different locations were touting themselves as being green, yet were doing things differently than anyone else, and may be focusing on this aspect or that, but missing another. This is where the advent of national standards came about.

Most standards include some variation on the themes of location and site, energy consumption and atmosphere, materials and resources, water efficiency, and indoor environmental quality. There is a fee to have any building certified and that cost falls upon the homeowner to pay.

The Green Building Standards

Energy Star. The U.S. EPA and the U.S. Dept. of Energy have Energy Star <http://www.energystar.gov> Qualified Homes. You're probably aware of the Energy Star rating system for dishwashers and other appliances. This certification works in similar fashion and will be easy for custom builders to achieve as they already pay close attention to details. Production builders can pick and choose construction details to reach the Energy Star goal.

Model Green Home Guide. This program by the National Association of Home Builders <http://www.nahb.org> is a builder-designed guide. It will be used by most of the members of the Home Builders Associations across the country. This will become a common and accessible guideline because of the ability for all types of builders to adopt it readily.

Health House. The American Lung Association <http://www.lungusa.org> created the Health House guidelines to help ensure new homes do not impact people's health. This guide emphasizes air quality, but the criteria also emphasize the most efficient options. Trained builders need to be used to receive the certification.

LEED for Homes. The U.S. Green Building Council has LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) for Homes certification. LEED is quickly becoming the industry standard for commercial construction and its transition to homes is gaining momentum. It's an expensive option for the average homeowner and not well known, unless you are in the building industry. This will be used by mostly high end, architect designed buildings.

This list only scratches the surface of what is out there, but it's a start and these are the most recognized.

So What?

Well the challenge for most of these programs is that they are energy efficiency based, with some other stuff tagged onto the end to make it an all around good thing. Air quality is typically the least important in most green building guidelines with things such "try to use as many low-VOC paints and finishes as possible" for example. They are not really making healthy homes/buildings, but more like less toxic buildings. For people with MCS and environmental sensitivities that simply doesn't work. Does that mean we throw the

guidelines out with the house? Not necessarily.

What Does Work for MCS

Green guidelines are inching towards better overall guidelines in every aspect, which will ultimately include indoor environmental quality. People with MCS and environmental illness for obvious reasons focus on the indoor environment, since it's the sole priority for survival. That doesn't mean though that we shouldn't be trying to find more energy efficient or more local products that can be healthy as well. Sometimes the tunnel effect can force us to overlook other opportunities. Energy efficiency is a real priority for people with MCS as limited income is oftentimes a reality, so things that use less energy, saves us money, so that's important. We know that materials with less processing and manufacturing can be healthier and often can be found locally, such as solid wood materials over particle board for example, which may employ a local builder, instead of sourcing something out from China.

Guideline Improvements

The guidelines are slowly getting stricter and stricter as the global building industry adopts one form or another. This is a great opportunity. All of the guidelines keep raising the bar to keep the interest and relevance of their program, and with more products becoming more available (such as zero VOC paints) we are seeing the ultimate goals of healthy homes slowly moving forward. What is more important, is the fact that the building industry as a whole is looking towards indoor environmental quality as a real issue that requires real thoughts and efforts to make changes from the procedures, and actions of the past. The building industry can be one of the hardest to change, as many skills and knowledge are learned onsite, and as change can be problematic, as it's a liability if something new doesn't work, and it's lost income to figure out how to do something new and different. Manufacturers are aware of this and making

newer products greener and healthier with no difference in use, or in warranty, attempting to make the transition as easy as possible to the builders. With the economy in the tank right now, many builders are in fact looking to find that niche market and marketing ability that will keep them in business with food on their table. Green building is one of the easiest ways to make that a reality. With greener and healthier services offered we can only hope that more builders will be able to work effectively with people with MCS.

Final Thoughts

You can download many green building guidelines for free from the websites listed. You won't get the full details on how to implement each of the points, but it will offer you a vocabulary of opportunities with which to discuss with builders and renovators. There will be elements in all of the documents that you have never considered utilizing. More importantly you can start to use the language when asking for renovations, such as "I want my bathroom renovation to meet or exceed (insert

your favorite guideline here's Indoor Air Quality guidelines. You could search out builders who are certified in these various programs as well, since they have an understanding of the basic requirements you need. Now, by talking their language, they have to enter into a real discussion, and that can only lead to better results. Save the money on certification and spend it on better, greener, and healthier products. Use the guidelines for references to ensure you are doing as much as you can, but spend the cash elsewhere, and be happy with your healthy house.

Stephen Collette is a Building Biology Environmental Consultant and LEED accredited professional, an Energy Star trained evaluator, and has used almost all the green building guidelines in some form or another. Stephen owns Your Healthy House, and is living with his family in Lakefield, Ontario.

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