

'Greenwash': A Way to Say 'Hogwash'

By JONATHAN D. GLATER

MORE and more developers have endorsed green construction, planning buildings that are energy-efficient wonders made with recycled materials. And more buyers and tenants want their homes and offices to possess these virtues.

But as claims of environmentally sound design multiply, a problem has come up. How can anyone be sure that a particular carpet really was made from old trash bags, that a redwood did not die for that deck, that a pump in an air-circulation system was a high-efficiency model?

The danger is what Anthony Bernheim, an architect at SMWM in San Francisco, calls "greenwash."

"Greenwash is when somebody says that, 'Oh, we have the greenest building in town,' and they do not have the metrics to show that they've done something," he said. "We've coined it from 'whitewash.'"

A range of businesses, industry trade groups and nongovernmental organizations have leaped to fill this need, offering seals of approval for everything from the source of lumber to the recycled content of various building materials.

Third-party certifications can support an application for the most recognized seal of approval, from the U.S. Green Building Council. The council, a nonprofit group, promotes energy efficiency and other environmental benefits in construction and design, and has established criteria to measure how green buildings are. The system is called Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design; so far more than 450 buildings have received some certification.

"The way that we have tried to build better buildings and affect building stock is to create a rating system that recognizes certain characteristics of the building, including products, materials and technologies," said S. Richard Fedrizzi, chief executive of the council. But he added, "For the most part, today we are relying on the honesty and the integrity of the manufacturers of those products and systems and services."

But increasingly, developers, owners, designers, architects and contractors are trying to ensure that the materials they use have the desired characteristics. Mr. Bernheim, the architect, gets certifications from Scientific Certification Systems, a company in Emeryville, Calif., that, among other things, evaluates emissions from carpets and furniture. Some materials are carcinogenic, while others could cause respiratory problems, said Kirsten T. Ritchie, director for environmental claim certification at Scientific Certification Systems.

Indoor air quality generally causes great concern, and avoiding problems requires careful monitoring, said Michael S. Andrew, manager for the Western region consulting business of Air Quality Sciences, an Atlanta firm. Mr. Andrew told a story he heard from a contractor, about how a subcontractor on a project tried to repair minor damage to a wall using an unapproved paint that could emit an undesired vapor.

Verifying recycled content of materials can be more difficult because a lab test cannot always reveal what something was made of. Working with the manufacturer must be part of that process.

For the Orchard Garden Hotel

project in San Francisco, contractors are using fly ash — a mineral residue from the combustion of powdered coal in electricity-generating plants — to make concrete, said Bill Krill, who heads the green building operation at Swinerton Builders, which is based in San Francisco.

"Ten years ago, it would've been a waste product," Mr. Krill said. "The fly ash will actually work with the concrete in the product and make a product that's as strong."

Mr. Krill said the project was also using wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, a nonprofit company whose international headquarters is in Bonn. The council certifies lumber that is harvested in an environmentally sustainable and socially conscious way.

Other certifications exist, and Michael Washburn, vice president for brand management at the council's office in the United States, said that the proliferation of standards was not necessarily a good thing.

"It is very frustrating for people who aren't close to the issue to treat it like, well, basically if you've got a certification system, it's O.K.," he said. "In fact, some of us don't really believe that some of these systems deal with these issues at all."

Ideally, there will be a general certification system someday, people at certifying groups said. A single standardized and comparable set of ratings could capture whether a product was made in an environmentally friendly way, without exploiting local labor, and that its use would have little impact on nature.

"We want to bring all those things together," said Ms. Ritchie of Scientific Certification Systems. "We want to have a holistic approach."

