

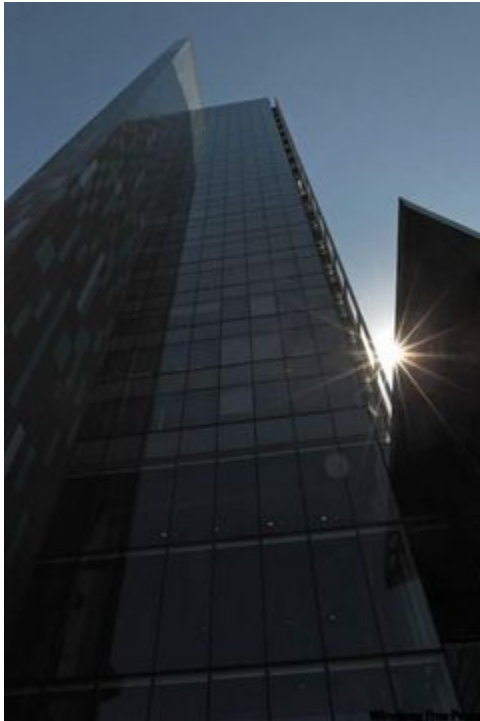
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The green bar is stunningly high

Since 2007, few Manitoba buildings have won LEED plaque

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The Manitoba Hydro building in downtown Winnipeg. (JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS ARCHIVES)

**LEEDing the charge --
Manitoba buildings
certified by North**

Manitoba Hydro Place is unique among North American office towers when it comes to the way it uses energy -- or more accurately, does not use the precious commodity the Crown corporation happens to produce and sell.

A 115-metre solar chimney, a structure as high as a football field is long, helps circulate air throughout the Portage Avenue building, which opened in December 2008. A 24-metre waterfall humidifies and dehumidifies the air, all of which is fresh, even during the winter months.

The largest closed geothermal loop in the province helps heat and cool the structure, which sports vegetation along its rooftops. Open atria allow sunlight to penetrate the interior.

Together, these features allow Manitoba Hydro's headquarters to use less than 50 per cent of the energy that would be required to run a conventional office tower of comparable size.

"This building, without question, is the most sustainable, energy-efficient building in North America. From an energy-efficiency perspective, nobody comes even close to it," said Tom Akerstream, Manitoba Hydro's corporate-facilities manager and the energy adviser on the downtown office project.

The structure has won no fewer than nine awards, including a 2009 honour for being the best tall building in North America, a 2010 award for sustainable architecture and the 2011 Royal Architectural Institute of Canada award for innovation.

But it cannot call itself a green building, at least not officially, as

America's most popular green-building brand:

Aboriginal House (University of Manitoba)

Assiniboine Credit Union (Pembina Highway)

Entegra Credit Union (Disraeli Freeway)

Friesen Tokar Architects (Waterfront Drive)

McFeetors Hall (University of Winnipeg)

Mountain Equipment Co-Op (Portage Avenue)

Smith Carter Architects (Buffalo Place)

Swan Valley Credit Union (Swan River)

RBC (Portage at Edmonton)

UWSA daycare (University of Winnipeg)

Source: Canadian Green Building Council, Manitoba chapter

it has yet to earn that distinction under the best-known rating system in North America: LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Two and a half years after it opened, Manitoba Hydro Place is still awaiting LEED certification. So are dozens of other Manitoba projects in various states of completion.

Out of hundreds of Manitoba buildings trying obtain a LEED plaque -- a nameplate that confers green bragging rights for the structure's owner -- only 10 have succeeded so far.

And since 2007, when the former Doer government declared new provincial building projects should strive for LEED certification, the number of successful applicants is zero, according to provincial records obtained through freedom-of-information legislation.

LEED supporters say the low certification numbers are a sign of the immense popularity of the green-building brand name. But critics in the green-building industry are frustrated with the time it takes to obtain the plaque, as well as a cumbersome certification process that may add anywhere from \$30,000 to \$100,000 to the cost of a project, depending on the size.

There have also been questions in the United States about whether LEED buildings are actually more energy efficient than other structures.

In Manitoba, the green-building industry supports the brand, even as it grumbles about the layers of bureaucracy involved with it.

"Before LEED, everyone was walking around green-washing. You really didn't have any kind of evaluation system for green buildings," said Doug Corbett, a principal at Winnipeg's Smith Carter Architects, whose Fort Garry headquarters was the first building in Manitoba to obtain a LEED platinum plaque, the most prestigious status in the hierarchy.

Obtaining LEED status is not just a matter of ordering up a plaque and slapping it on the wall. The process begins with an "integrated design process," which requires architects and contractors to collaborate on almost every aspect of the tendering and construction.

Once the new building or renovation project is complete, the designers exchange paperwork with the Canada Green Building Council, which has offices in Ottawa and Vancouver and appoints adjudication teams in other cities.

Rather than simply measuring energy efficiency, the council awards points toward LEED certification by using a checklist that also takes into account a multitude of factors, including building materials and the commuting habits of green-building occupants.

Smith Carter, for example, had to lease 12 hybrid vehicles for its headquarters to gain all the points it needed for platinum status. Manitoba Hydro hopes transit subsidies will help put its downtown building over the top.

A Seven Oaks hospital emergency room renovation, however, was rapped for not having enough bicycle parking spots -- for patients as well as staff, according to a lengthy LEED critique circulating through Winnipeg's green-building community.

Marten Duhoux, a Friesen Tokar architect who speaks for the Canadian Green Building Council's Manitoba chapter, acknowledges the LEED-certification program has received a spike in applications but said the national council has doubled its staff to deal with the backlog.

This crunch actually illustrates LEED's popularity, said Cindy Choy, Manitoba's green-building policy director.

"It's not just the green-building council suffering from the great success. This is a new process for the building industry, so what we're witnessing is a transformation," she said.

None of the 70 Manitoba-funded projects that are trying to obtain LEED status have succeeded in obtaining their plaques because it takes more than four years to design and build a project, Choy said. And even if they do not ultimately succeed, they will still be more environmentally friendly than an ordinary building, she added.

"What we want to do is encourage and support the benefit of green building," she said.

Choy and Duhoux rejected suggestions the certification process is subjective or beset by bureaucracy. The complexity of the certification process stems from a desire to measure not just energy efficiency, but how well a green building fits into a community, Choy said.

"There is a diversity of credits you can get," Duhoux added.

LEED has come under heavier criticism in the U.S., where LEED standards were amended in 2009 after studies found some LEED-certified buildings wasted more energy than buildings that didn't have plaques proclaiming them to be green.

Despite the changes to LEED certification, there is little to ensure a LEED building is actually run in an efficient manner after it opens, said a public-sector environment official in Winnipeg, speaking under condition of anonymity.

"One of the major criticisms is, once you get your plaque you don't have to maintain it. You can tear out all of the bike racks for SUV parking spots, put PCBs in the water system and burn baby pandas in your furnace if you'd like to," the official joked. "They're changing this now, but it's too slow."

The same official complained the LEED certification process is too expensive for some of the community centres and other small projects that are required to seek LEED status under the provincial green-building policy.

While another \$100,000 is not a problem for the \$283-million Manitoba Hydro project, Corbett said, an additional \$30,000 is a back-breaker for a daycare struggling to raise renovation funds.

Duhoux disputed those cost estimates, insisting it only costs several thousand to register and shepherd through a LEED project. Friesen Tokar is working to obtain LEED certification for a Stonewall community-centre project without experiencing financial hardship, he said.

The cost of green construction itself, however, does not appear to be an issue. Any additional capital costs incurred by a green design can be recovered through energy efficiencies, Corbett said. Those costs typically are anywhere from two to five per cent above conventional construction costs.

For now, the primary frustration with the brand remains bureaucracy -- and time.

"We should be pretty well almost done. We've been working on this for two years," said Akerstream of Manitoba Hydro's efforts to obtain a plaque for its award-winning structure. "It's a little frustrating, because it takes longer than we'd like."

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