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Going green pays off

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A year from now, the Westin Peachtree Hotel will be back to normal — all sleek, shiny, smoky black and green.

Green?

Not the color. Last year's tornado, which broke hundreds of windows in the iconic downtown hotel, is giving the building's owners a chance to repair it with more efficient and environmentally friendly materials. The building's 6,350 windows will be thicker, more tinted and have heavier glass to provide better insulation and cut energy costs, said Westin general manager Ed Walls. "There are two reasons for doing it," Walls said: "It's the right thing to do, and we'll see a good return on our investment."

Going green in buildings used to be the domain of deep pocketed companies looking to boost their image or smaller businesses launching efforts to recycle plastic bottles and cut down on paper waste.

Not anymore.

Green is fast gaining acceptance as a way to not only save money on energy and operating costs in buildings, but also as a way to lure tenants, qualify for tax breaks and attract clients, whether they are environmentally conscious companies or leisure travelers who prefer hotels that conserve water by washing linens less.

Green buildings fetched higher rent and had fewer vacancies than other buildings of similar age, size and location, according to a recent analysis by real estate researcher CoStar Group Inc.

Nationally, the occupancy rate for green buildings averaged 90.3 percent compared to 84.7 percent for their peers in the first three months of 2009, the report said. Average rent per square foot for a green building was \$38.86 compared to \$29.80 for nongreen buildings, according to the CoStar study of about 3,000 green-certified offices.

And research firm McGraw-Hill Construction predicts green buildings will represent 20 percent to 25 percent of new commercial and institutional construction starts by 2013, up from about 10 percent to 12 percent today. "Property owners are looking for ways to distinguish themselves from others in the market," said Greg O'Brien, principal in Sustainable Office, a green building consulting firm based in Atlanta. "The risk of not developing or building green far outweighs any cost associated with it. Tenants are demanding it. Regulations are supporting it."

Turning green into green

At the Emory University Conference Center Hotel all waste is recycled, except for food and wood. Lights cut off on timers, kitchen grease is turned into fuel and copiers are set to print on both sides of recycled paper. Instead of trashing unwanted staff uniforms, they are donated.

The effort has paid off. Conventioneers who prefer green hotels threw \$1 million the conference center's way in 2007, including giants such as The Home Depot, Whole Foods and Wal-Mart, said general manager Kathryn Johnson.

Stacy Martin, general manager of the Ellis on Peachtree, hopes to see the same financial benefit. The Ellis — most know it as the old Winecoff — also recycles its trash and uses recycled paper. But in a twist, the hotel filters its own water for visitors who prefer bottled water. The response from guests: keep it up, Martin said. "Half of the people who stay with us say that they chose us because we do these things," she said.

Emory University is spreading the benefits beyond the conference center hotel. The school has mandated that all new buildings be constructed to green standards, said Ciannat Howett, director of Emory's Sustainability Initiative. The school's first green building was the Whitehead Biomedical Research Center, constructed in 2001.

But it's not cheap. Average upfront costs can be as much a 1.5 percent higher than traditional building, said David Payne, a spokesman for the university. But Emory expects to recoup the expenses between one and four years through energy savings and increased business because the school is green.

And Howett said today's students and staff are attracted to green building, which helps position Emory to recruit the "best and the brightest" as well as retain them once they get there.

"There are a lot of reputational benefits to this," she said.

Mark of approval

All green is not equal, operators of green buildings said. Like any bandwagon, it's easy to jump on with a few claims by the source.

The leading certification for meeting environmental standards has been LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design by the U.S. Green Building Council. The nonprofit organization has developed requirements for buildings that can take years to certify. Buildings receive LEED silver, gold or platinum certification.

Green Seal, an independent nonprofit that certifies green practices, also has set standards that businesses use to achieve third-party impartiality.

"Everyone says they are green, but if they are not certified, then who is making that measurement, the hotel?" said Johnson, who is seeking silver LEED status for the Emory conference center hotel. The hotel and the Ellis already have Green Seal status.

“That claim needs to be certified by an outside agency, not the general manager,” Johnson said.

Most new buildings come online meeting some LEED standards. The Marriott Airport Gateway Hotel, which is expected to open in September 2010, is being designed to meet LEED certification when the doors open. The chain’s operators hope that successes at other hotels could be duplicated here.

Water use targeted

At Oregon’s Courtyard Portland City Center and Maryland’s Chevy Chase Courtyard, energy consumption was reduced by 28 percent — the equivalent to the energy consumption of 42 households per year; water consumption was reduced by 26 percent mainly through the use of dual flush toilets; and more than 75 percent of construction waste was recycled and re-used.

When Midtown Atlanta’s 1180 Peachtree was completed in February 2006, it was the first high-rise office building in the southeastern United States to be certified LEED gold. The 41-story office tower is 94 percent occupied at a time that many commercial properties are struggling to attract and keep tenants. Its largest tenant is King & Spalding, one of Atlanta’s largest law firms.

Green “is becoming the market expectation,” said Larry Channell, senior property manager for Hines, which developed 1180 Peachtree and sold it, but provides on site management and leasing services. “It makes no difference,” whether the economy is good or bad, he added.

Skanska USA, the contractor for the Westin Peachtree, not only knows how to build green, it lives green.

It is one of the nation’s largest green builders. Its Atlanta office — 41,000 square feet of Gold LEED-certified space on the sixth floor of 55 Allen Plaza—is a model of energy efficiency, water conservation and sustainable materials such as the cork and rubber used in floors and wall coverings. “The green legacy is as important as the legacy of the physical structure itself,” said John Reyhan, executive vice president of Skanska. “When you do both the right way, you have a powerful combination.”

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