


 commentary

**Current Commentary: High-performance Idaho?**

by Kevin Van Den Wymelenberg - 5.31.06

The power went out in downtown Boise recently, and it was as if time stopped, if only briefly. Tenants in the building where the Integrated Design Lab-Boise (IDL) is located congregated in the lobby, talking and laughing. The light of a single skylight provided the hospitable environment.

While this rare occurrence was viewed as a pleasant reprieve from the daily monotony, a regular reoccurrence would likely be viewed as a significant detriment that could impact worker productivity and business profits.

But what if designers did not depend on electricity for lighting? What if all work environments were designed, similar to the space IDL occupies, with daylight in mind? During the power outage, the IDL continued to function at a high level with six-hour laptop batteries and adequate daylight to conduct meetings and daily work.

All of Idaho, but especially the Treasure Valley around Boise, is growing fast, and business is booming. Utility rates are low, and tax structures make Idaho a great place for business. However, Idaho's reliance on hydropower is causing concern among those seeking stable long-term power supplies for large businesses. It has environmentalists clamoring about depleted salmon populations and a strained aquifer. Utilities in Idaho are being forced to find creative ways to meet the ever-growing energy demand, and the state is beginning to draft a new energy plan.

Some community leaders worry that Boise's growth is out of control, and that planning regulations are insufficient. The concern is made evident by the rapid development of strip malls and other speculative properties popping up all over the Treasure Valley. At every highway exit, there is another monotonous subdivision ballooning out of proportion. These realities, like the recent power outage in downtown Boise, are a wake-up call that Idahoans have begun to recognize.

Idaho has monumental landscapes of rich and



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varied natural splendor. The Snake River Valley, Lake Coeur D'Alene and the Sawtooth Mountains dominate the collective memory of Idahoans. There is a long tradition of fishing, hunting, skiing and hiking in Idaho that has evolved into a culture of stewardship for natural landscapes. Idaho's outdoor enthusiasts understand that these resources are an important component of Idaho's culture, and that these activities are integral to the economic success of the state. They also realize their personal relationship with the outdoors does not need to end with the weekend.

Some outdoor enthusiasts are demanding more from their nine-to-five work environments. They do not want to be buried in an office landscape, but would rather be connected to the natural landscape. They are asking for high-performance buildings that have access to daylight and views, maintain good air quality and use appropriate lighting. They want to live in buildings that interact with the outdoors, consider human comfort and use material and energy resources wisely.

According to Sue Seifert of the State Division of Energy, "High-performance design not only helps to save environmental resources, it increases the bottom line and is good for health and morale."

Big business is beginning to see value in meeting the market demand for high-performance environments. Since the University of Idaho contracted with the Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance BetterBricks program and opened the IDL in early 2004, it has offered consultation on more than 75 new commercial buildings with the goal of improving user comfort and productivity while reducing energy consumption.

The IDL works with design teams to more fully integrate their design process, and it helps to increase building users' value for quality visual and thermal environments, while also helping owners realize the potential financial benefits of building in this capacity. The business case for making sound design decisions that reduce energy consumption and improve the work environment is getting easier to make with building owners because of financial incentives available through Idaho Power.

The IDL is currently involved in major new construction projects with St. Luke's Regional Medical Center, Ada County and Nampa School District. These entities should be recognized for their ongoing commitment to providing quality working and learning environments for their employees, patients, clients and students while maintaining a high level of energy consciousness. They are also beginning to enjoy the financial fruits of their commitment.

"There has been a real cultural change in new



Daylighting shines at the Foothills Environmental Learning Center in Boise.



This Head Start classroom in Garden City, Idaho, caters to bright kids.

commercial design and construction in the last two years," said Ken Baker, a 25-year Idaho native and longtime human comfort and energy advocate. "This is partly due to efforts like LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), and it is partly due to savvy business owners recognizing the value of green principles. But mostly, it has to do with the rural roots of Idaho, and it still being a small community. When positive change occurs, others will see it and follow suit."

Idaho has a solid foundation of high-quality working and learning environments that are saving energy and improving the bottom line for businesses. As people experience high-performance environments and understand the human comfort, economic and environmental benefits, the landscape of the built environment will continue to respond to the outdoor traditions and culture of Idahoans.

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