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Profile - The Gates Foundation LEED Platinum Seattle Headquarters

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What space would your not-for-profit organization design if it could start from scratch on a blank piece of paper? What if the space needed to be home to more than 1,000 personnel, have a constant flow of visitors, and represent both your global mission and your role as a visible member of the local community? In this first article in his series looking at not-for-profits as urban neighbors, Professor James Hagy, Director of The Rooftops Project, visits with the Gates Foundation at its recently opened LEED Platinum Seattle headquarters campus.

Many years ago, prior to a 35-year career in law, I made my living as a professional magician. But if you had asked me how to make a major downtown office building invisible, I would have asked to get back to you on that. Not any more.

I had expectations about the scale of the new Gates Foundation headquarters campus in Seattle. With its 639,860 useable square foot initial construction and room for potential expansion to a future 240,000 square foot third building, the 12-acre campus’ interior capacity is more than half the size of the Empire State Building.

Yet, as a first-time visitor, the most surprising aspect of the campus is how connected it seems to the surrounding cityscape. At street level, the six-story, low-rise design fits seamlessly into the downtown Seattle community as a nearby neighbor to the city’s famous Space Needle and a bustling tourist and trade area. It is a natural in its surroundings, creating the illusion that it has been there forever even though the foundation moved in just this past June 2011.

While not expecting a conjuring trick, I was prepared to be impressed by the Gates headquarters project. After all, it has been in preparation for more than seven years as the home to the almost 1,000 employees, hundreds of contractors, and daily distinguished visitors who collaborate on the urgent global priorities that Bill and Melinda Gates have set. The organization’s mission is to act on the belief that “every person should have the chance to live a healthy, productive life” through grant-making and strategy in three core areas: global development, global health, and a U.S. program focused on promoting fundamental improvements in education, libraries, and computer-access.

The Case for Real Estate
For an organization so visibly focused on solving some of world’s most complex social challenges, why was it important to embark on a real estate project of such ambitious scale?

The Gates Foundation is a knowledge organization; its staff, partners, and grantees constantly collaborate. Yet its staff was located in leased space in five different buildings around the city. Melissa Milburn, external communications spokesperson at the foundation and host for my visit, recalls that “we were at 300 people when I started four years ago and now we are at 1,000.” Before moving to the new campus, working sessions were sometimes conducted via video conference between groups as close as one block away from one another. In-person meetings often involved van rides of 15 to 30 minutes, requiring advance scheduling, depleting valuable professional time and serving as a damper to spontaneous interactions.

The objective was to reunite in one location the foundation’s unique workforce and to enable the staff to focus on their mission: giving all people a chance to live healthy and productive lives. Their new home needed to act as a hub for
innovation and to facilitate gatherings of experts from many fields, perspectives, and countries, some of whom had not previously worked in a traditional office environment. The campus serves as an important tool in recruitment and retention, too.

And like many professional service firms, staff members at the Gates Foundation frequently are present beyond the traditional nine to five workday, making the space a home away from home. Extensive research and collaborative work sessions with foundation staff during the design process revealed that “staff travel extensively, spend long hours on the phone, and maintain exhausting schedules.”

Melissa recalls that the week the campus move took place, staff “stood at windows and waved at each other when they moved in. I think what surprised people was: ‘wow, we really do have a big organization,’ because in the buildings we were in we never felt that presence.”

Now, meetings can be held convenient to all. As important, staff members are visible to each other across the campus’ common spaces, allowing casual interactions when coming and going from the buildings or when using amenities like the cafeteria. There are “touchdown” spaces at the perimeter of each floor and wing, allowing for spontaneous or planned small group discussion. The stacking plan (location of workgroups) promotes these interactions, too.

“We do a lot more walking than we did in our other buildings, though, because it is a bigger space,” Melissa reflects. “But we have all bought more comfortable shoes to deal with that. No more vans.”

The scale of the campus can facilitate even global gatherings. Melissa explains that, “once a year we get together for an annual meeting. We will walk a block away to have the actual theater be our stage, but then we’ll come together here for the mixing, the reception, getting together and seeing each other. On a quarterly basis, we all meet in the atrium for our meeting with Jeff Raikes,” who is the foundation’s CEO.

The four-story atrium both works as a daily informal gathering place and can be converted into a venue for large meetings. The day of my visit, foundation staff members were rehearsing acts for an in-house variety show conceived by Bill Gates Sr. as an occasion for personnel to come to know another facet of each other’s diverse talents. The upper floor or balcony spaces overlooking the atrium can even hold seating when the atrium hosts special events or performances. Melissa points out that the foundation “will host hundreds of meetings a year in the conference center, and will bring in participants ranging from global leaders to members of the Seattle community.”

Despite the compelling case for the new headquarters, the foundation kept foremost in mind its determined dedication to the foundation’s core mission and to being good stewards of its financial resources. Convinced of the benefits a new campus would bring, Bill and Melinda Gates contributed $350 million from personal funds toward the $500 million project cost, reducing dramatically the impact of the project on foundation resources. “Being good stewards of the money was a key piece to the project,” Melissa confirms.

Anne Cunningham, interior designer and principal at NBBJ and one of the senior NBBJ professionals on the project, adds that “it’s important to point out the value gained by consolidating its five offices. It brought the foundation’s biggest asset, its staff and partners, together under one roof. Staff can run ideas past each other without formal meetings, they can quickly and easily share knowledge across departments and expertise levels, and, most importantly, they can share in the ever-present challenge of solving difficult problems, many of which have never been tackled before.”

The Planning Process
A central tenet in the pursuit of the foundation’s core mission is to “set clear priorities because we have the greatest impact by staying focused.” This same sense of discipline was reflected from the outset in planning the campus.

The seven-year project began with a three-year discovery process, envisioned at the highest-level leadership within the foundation and supported by a top team of outside professionals led by the architects at NBBJ.

Like most capital projects at not-for-profit organizations, the senior-most contact was an executive who already had a full plate of responsibilities. In the case of the foundation, this was Martha Choe, Chief Administrative Officer, Foundation Operations, whose responsibilities include information technology, security, site operations, and global workplace resources. Before joining the foundation, Martha was director of the Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development. She also served two four-year terms on the Seattle City Council.

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While the foundation has an exceptionally large budget for a non-profit, more than 1,000 staff, and a broad mission, its central decision-making group for the project was small. The Board-involved trustees were Bill and Melinda Gates, Bill’s father William Gates Sr., CEO Jeff Raikes, and Martha Choe.
Clearly this was a group with an established, close working relationship. Melissa reflects with a smile that “I am sure that Bill and Melinda talk about it at dinner on Sundays sometimes.”

Yet such a big project involved many internal stakeholders, outside professionals, and thousands of workers, subcontractors, and suppliers. Sonya Poland, Communications Manager at NBBJ, notes that “this is a project of a lifetime for the architects and project partners who helped bring the campus to life. How often do you get to create a place for people to solve global problems? The project’s success has much to do with the fully integrated team approach. From day one, architects, interior designers, contractors, landscape architects, engineers, and the client came together to deliver the vision. There is heart in this project, contributed by everyone who worked on it.”

As the lead owner contact through the design and construction of the project on top of her other roles for the foundation, Martha Choe concurs. “I was fortunate to have an outstanding team who worked well together, and I had tremendous confidence in their ability to execute against the vision we were given by our chairs. My advice to other not-for-profit executives would be to ensure you’ve got the right complement of experienced people and who can collaborate effectively. There were thousands of details that I knew this team could manage, and my job was to keep us on time and on budget by making timely and informed decisions and delegate the details to this team.”

Guiding Principles

Given the scale of the campus and its importance both to the organization and to the Seattle community, the foundation adopted and articulated a set of overarching principles to inform the project’s development:

For our neighbors:
• The development will fit with the size and scale of the surrounding environment.
• The design will be inspiring and creative and fit within the neighborhood.
• The campus will be secure in a low-profile way.
• The edges of the campus must be well-defined and landscaped.
• The design will integrate sustainable materials and methods.

For our employees:
• The design must create a sense of place that reflects the foundation’s work in health and learning.
• The buildings will be connected in a campus-like setting designed to facilitate interaction, collaboration, and learning.
• The campus design will include open green spaces.
• The design will provide access to natural light for all.
The Location
Why Seattle? “The Gates Family, as you know, is from the Pacific Northwest. And it was really important for them to be in the heart of the city,” Melissa explains. The idea of an integrated campus was long held. The site was purchased by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 1994.

But before the campus opened, the presence of the Gates Foundation as an urban neighbor was sometimes unfelt; its leased locations were dispersed and anonymous. “No one knew we were here,” Melissa noted.

“I think it is really obvious that we made the right choice, because I think the city feels pride in having us here. We are proud to be here as well, to really integrate with the rest of the city and not to be in these unmarked buildings anymore, when no one knew where we were. They know now where we are. We’re here and we’re proud of it, and they are too.”

Martha Choe’s prior economic development role with the State of Washington informed her approach to the project. “Those of us who are in the non-profit world sometimes forget the economic impact of what we bring to the local economy in terms of jobs because we are so focused—and rightly so—on what we can do to strengthen our communities through our work. With the scale of this project, we were able to employ 600 workers on site at peak construction, and this provided a real boost during this slowdown.

“Our foundation sees our partnerships with the public and private sectors, as well as non-profits, as critical to our core program work, and this project was really no different. We worked closely and collaboratively with the city and state on major infrastructure projects adjacent to our project. We are right across the street from the Seattle Center, home to the city’s many cultural venues and a popular destination site. The foundation and city created an innovative arrangement for building a single parking garage that could serve both our needs at different times.

“In general, we see ourselves in partnership with public entities. We look for win/win outcomes.”

The Site Returns to Its Roots
The site has a “distant past as a wetland marsh,” as the foundation put it in one of its newsletter series about the project. It is located between Lake Union, a fresh water lake, and Elliot Bay, which is composed of salt water. Over the centuries it was a peat bog, with native plants providing an attractive habitat for migrating birds and local animal life. The site hosted waterfowl, as well as edible plants like wild onions and berries.

The Duwamish Native Americans crossed the site between their villages at the Lake and fishing camps that they situated at the Bay. As stewards of the site, the Duwamish maintained the wetland through periodic controlled burns.

As Seattle developed, the site became developed too. It was crisscrossed with railway trestles used to move lumber to the bay. By the 20th century, it served as a transportation barn for streetcar trolleys and buses, and later as asphalt parking for the nearby Seattle Center.

With the acquisition and development of the campus site by the Gates Foundation, 12 acres of urban paving were consolidated into a two-acre garage structure, permitting the return of a more inviting and natural habitat for the community and for campus residents. Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, which had overall responsibility for the campus landscape design, was charged with this restoration effort.

The campus exterior landscape design aims to provide a welcoming space for work and collaboration among foundation staff while also tying to the neighborhood around it. Wetland areas and dark-water bogs have been restored on parts of the site previously occupied by pavement. Birds are returning; even a heron has been spotted in the bogs.

Native Northwest species, such as vine and big-leaf maples, were complemented by non-native species best suited to tolerate glare, heat, and periodic drought characteristic of urban centers. The team selected London plane tree specimens that were 15- to 20-feet tall, ready to provide immediate shade and visual impact. One mature maple tree, at the building entrance, weighed almost 10,000 pounds and was lifted in by crane.

Streetscape
Today the neighborhood is shared by both Seattle businesses and tourists. Across from the Seattle Center and a few blocks from the Space Needle, the area is also home to the Experience Music Project (a museum dedicated to Jimi Hendrix, born in Seattle) and the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame, which opened in 2004 and is now combined with the Experience Music Project. Both were established by Paul Allen, who co-founded Microsoft Corporation with Bill Gates. They are housed in a Frank Gehry-designed building with bright, multicolored roofs that stand out in aerial photos like the image featured in the Gates Foundation campus materials.

In a video essay on the foundation’s Web site, Bill Gates Sr. expresses his hope that the campus will serve as “a beautiful, welcoming addition to the community.” As a visitor to the site it is easy to conclude that this vision has
been achieved. Images from above show the scale of the project, but at street level it has a human dimension rather than being imposing.

Designed so passersby can look in through a primarily glass façade, the campus buildings are intended to allow the public to sense the foundation’s energies. Pedestrians can use wooden benches along Fifth Avenue North to enjoy the landscaping or to wait for frequent public transportation.

The foundation anticipates that “visitors will see artwork from around the world, including the Pacific Northwest.” Video artworks (currently those of Korean artist Kimsooja) are displayed on a 9x12-foot digital screen. And quotations from a local Seattle poet, resonating with the foundation’s work, appear in what the foundation refers to as a “river” of words at bench-height. Even during the construction phase, the barrier fence was decorated with murals commissioned from Urban Artworks, a not-for-profit that provides skills training and subsidized employment in the arts for Seattle-area youth. Each mural panel represented peoples the foundation touches around the world, from rural farmers to vaccine recipients.

The foundation’s support of the arts continues into the campus’ main reception area. The foundation engaged Portland, Oregon artist Marie Watt to create an art installation drawing from her preference for natural materials, in this case 14-foot tall sculpture composed of a giant stack of diverse, colorful, neatly folded blankets donated to the project. Entitled Blanket Stories: Matriarch, Guardian and Seven Generations, each blanket is associated with a memory and is labeled with a personal message from its donor describing the significant life event, family relationship or friendship, or other sentimental attachment the blanket represents.

Visitor Center
In addition to the work and meeting spaces within the main buildings, the campus also includes a 10,000 square foot Visitor Center that opened on February 4, 2012. The Visitor Center is free and open to the public Tuesday through Saturday all year. The foundation undertook responsibility for the design concept of the Visitor Center, which was executed by Olson Kundig, the Seattle-based international architectural design firm.

The Visitor Center is intended as a place to help the community understand what the foundation is doing. The foundation anticipates that “the center will be a window through which the public can see and learn about the foundation’s work and its efforts to help people around the world live healthy and productive lives.”

The exhibits will be interactive and “will tell compelling stories grounded in data and knowledge about the problems we address and the progress being made locally, nationally, and globally.” They will also invite visitors to make their own assessment of the measures the Gates Foundation has set for its program, another nod to the foundation’s high regard for both rigorous metrics and transparency.

The messages presented in the Visitor Center are also designed to invite each person to be mindful of his or her own connection to charitable and philanthropic hopes and goals, perhaps to inspire visitors to do something that they believe will make a meaningful impact on the world, too.

The Visitor Center is designed so that passersby who may not have time to come in can still have a glimpse, too. The center is at street level, incorporated within the structure of the Seattle Center 5th Avenue North Garage. Once again, this brings both the life of the campus and the foundation’s mission directly to the doorstep and streetscape, in what in many for-profit developments might have been retail space or even garage wall concrete.

The Campus as a Statement in Support of Mission
Steve McConnell, NBBJ architect and the partner in charge of the project, says, “I believe the foundation saw the investment in architecture as one strategy to signal commitment to its mission and world-changing problems. We designed the campus to enable staff to do their best work—connecting people face-to-face and encouraging collaboration.”

NBBJ communications manager Sonya Poland adds, “The campus itself is a physical communications tool. The work being done inside the foundation is what matters most and this is illuminated through the architecture. The energy and activity going on inside is visible to passersby via expansive glass façades. Living roofs, wetland restoration, and ample green space speak to the humane nature of the work. And solar arrays on the roof, automatic sun shades, and public benches and artwork communicate a respect for the community and the environment.”

The foundation’s Web site page “New Campus” underscores this theme: “We want the campus to be a place that inspires and creates optimism and hope, and a hub for innovation and gatherings of experts from many fields, perspectives, and countries who are dedicated to improving lives here and around the world.” Even the footprints of the buildings’ foundations connect symbolically with the locations around the globe where the foundation and its grantees advance this mission.
A Shared Passion for the Role of Physical Space

Sonya Poland of NBBJ comes to the task with her own long-standing appreciation for the role real estate can have in expressing and supporting a not-for-profit’s mission. “When I was 16 my father, a Presbyterian minister, managed the construction of our new church—from the ground up. I remember how important it was to him that the building itself communicated the church’s mission of stewardship and community. It’s easy to see how other non-profits facing similar tasks would be curious about the role and opportunities for architecture in supporting their missions. What kinds of design strategies help communicate an organization’s mission? What are some of the simple things you can do with little cost? What are some things you can do immediately to an existing facility?”

Martha Choe shares this conviction about this role of building as an expression of the organization. “We were privileged to build a new campus and have the chance to make it as consistent with our design precepts as possible.”

We asked Martha what design approaches she might suggest for organizations of limited means and budget, or that can be implemented in an existing facility rather than a new design process. “Certain elements such as trying to make our building as transparent as possible to bring in light and allow passersby to see within to the life and work of the space would be difficult to achieve with existing buildings. Our own design sensibility tended toward understated and timeless, serene and dignified, at the same time connecting occupants to the beauties and complexities of the natural world outside our walls. Regardless of whether broad stroke expressions are possible on simpler projects it’s always possible to be as inclusive as possible, to listen carefully to occupants and designers, to include their expertise and views whenever possible. Concentrating on functionality is also a good organizing principle, and looking for ways to express this functionality through architectural form.”

Sheep as Contributors

Even the selection of seating for guests in the reception area was viewed as a chance to connect design to message. Thirty-foot-long slabs of felt were layered on top of each other to produce the main seating area in reception. Anne Cunningham discusses the decision to use felt as the primary material: “NBBJ chose the material wool because it transcends cultures, is 100 percent natural and sustainable, and is an internationally recognized texture and material. We collaborated with an artisan named Janice Arnold, a felt maker in our own backyard. She produces her work less than 100 miles from Seattle, and the felt comes from a sheep farm just outside her workshop.”

Sonya Poland recalls, “I had the pleasure of going to Janice’s workshop and watching her work. She took me to see the sheep that were sheared for the felt couch. Now, whenever I sit on the couch, I always get a big smile thinking about the sheep back on the farm that produced the wool I’m sitting on.”

Sustainable Design

The NBBJ team brought perspectives grounded in “Change Design,” an initiative it introduced in 2006. The concept emphasizes designs that are “performance driven, humanistic, and sustainable.”

In Change Design, NBBJ’s 2009 book of the same name, NBBJ architects express these principles in their own ways. Richard Swett thinks that “‘design’ in the management sense goes beyond the physical environment. It’s about ordering relationships that encourage the creativity and cooperation that benefit the organization.” Daniel Pink expresses a viewpoint that will resonate with many not-for-profits in the Rooftops Project audience, emphasizing the benefit of the talents and resources of a team like NBBJ. “Many organizations want to create better workplaces. The reason they fail is that they don’t know how.”

Not so at the Gates Foundation, where with NBBJ’s leadership the project incorporates many cutting-edge environmental technologies. As the architect and the interior, workplace, and lighting designers for the project, NBBJ coordinated consideration of the sustainability features. ARUP, which also was responsible for structural engineering, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing (SMEP), audio/visual and acoustics, and IT, was a sustainability consultant, as was Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, which was responsible for the project landscape design.

The campus makes extensive use of local and recycled construction materials, as well as indigenous, locally-sourced plant materials. Margaret Montgomery, who as NBBJ’s lead sustainable designer played a key role in the incorporation of sustainable elements in the design, points out, these are steps organizations of every size and even limited resources may be able to adopt. “The use of landscaping, returning land back to green space, and minimizing the footprint of the building are a few things that can be done on a budget.”

Margaret adds that “even simple things such as the durability of the skin [the exterior façade material or curtain wall] contribute to the lifespan of the building.”

The buildings, spanning more than one-half acre in size, were designed and constructed as “green” roofs. These six “living” roofs provide multiple benefits, including the reduction of storm water runoff, moderating temperature extremes, and serving as a habitat for birds and insects.

As a commitment to the foundation’s core principles, it made heavy investments in sustainable technologies, some with payback periods of up to 30 years that a profit-oriented public company might not choose. The Gates Foundation set a stated objective to design the campus for a 100-year life.
As Melissa Milburn explains it, “Part of our mission is that we are in it for the long haul. And so for us to show that through our design, as a key message and value statement, by having a 100-year campus, really helps people understand that what we are working on are intractable problems that are going to take perhaps decades to change but that we are invested in this. We’re serious and we’re going to do this.”

Anne Cunningham from NBBJ draws a direct link to the project’s design decisions. “Most buildings are designed for 20–30 years. As a 100-year building, we needed to put extra thought into how the building could accommodate growth and change over a long time. Component-based furniture, column-free space, raised floors, and demountable partitions are just a few ways we integrated flexibility into the design. In addition to flexibility, all material selections—both interior and core and shell—were mindful of durability and a 100-year lifespan.”

The flexibility of the floor plates, the durability of the materials, and the landscape plan all support this key value statement. “We’re in it for the long haul,” Melissa underscores.

The project includes, for example, a 750,000-gallon thermal energy storage tank that air chills water at night and provides cooling during the day through the buildings’ air-conditioning system. Energy consumption was designed to be 25 percent lower than the requirements of applicable code. The foundation now estimates total energy consumption to have been reduced by 39 percent. Energy for some 36 percent of domestic hot water supply is provided by a solar panel array on the roof of one office wing, which the foundation estimates as reducing natural gas consumption by 4,750 therms per year.

A rainwater storage area, with a one million-gallon capacity, provides water for irrigation, water features, and toilets. Water conservation permits the recycling of some 1.2 million gallons annually for non-potable uses.

All of this and more has been elegantly described by the Gates Foundation communications team through updates and educational materials on its Web site.

**LEED Platinum**

The foundation and its design team planned the campus to track for LEED Gold. But a few weeks after my visit they got the exciting news that it had been awarded LEED Platinum status. This recognition makes the Gates Foundation campus the largest non-profit LEED-NC Platinum building and the fifth largest LEED-NC Platinum building of any type in the world. The foundation notes that only 283 projects worldwide have achieved LEED-NC Platinum, 82 percent of which are less than 100,000 square feet.

Not-for-profits often struggle with whether to seek LEED or similar industry certification of their projects, or to pursue sustainable design elements without seeking formal certification with the thought that the incremental money required to seek and maintain certification can be spent elsewhere. The Gates team decided to seek certification. What was the thought process?

Margaret Montgomery explains. “It was important to the foundation to be able to verify the sustainable strategies and systems implemented in the campus were actually achieving the anticipated staff, community, and environmental benefits. USGBC’s rigorous third-party verification process provided the proof that the campus was achieving its environmental and performance goals.”

Melissa Milburn adds that while the Gates Foundation “didn’t set out initially to go platinum, decisions that were made along the way because it was a good use of money for a long-term project like this came together to point in that direction.”

Margaret Montgomery notes that “the mandate for the City was silver. As we went through the process, we found that we were able to accommodate a lot of LEED requirements and it became more and more important in every decision we were making. We were mindful of that. Platinum was achieved by making long-term good decisions for the project that moved toward Gold. The importance of a LEED accreditation was having that framework in place and measuring where we are. Having the data to track to LEED was critical.”

Here too, the analytical nature of the foundation’s professionals and work is a naturally supportive backdrop. Melissa Milburn smiles and chuckles. “We like data here.”

“The achievement of LEED Platinum on a campus of this size is notable,” adds Sonya Poland. “The project team was dedicated to making sure the design never strayed from the foundation’s mantra of ‘do the right thing.’” The foundation found that “it just so happened the best decisions were also the greenest.”

The Seattle Center 5th Avenue North Garage itself achieved a separate LEED Gold certification. The two-acre underground garage provides five stories of naturally-lit parking for over 1,000 cars, complementing the 400 spaces located under the main campus itself. Built through a public-private partnership between the foundation and the City of Seattle, it too features a 1.4 acre “living roof” that returns 75 percent of the structure to green space.
Profiles

Other Locations
The foundation also has offices in Washington, D.C., New Delhi, Beijing, and London, supporting foundation work in more than 100 countries. Each of those sites is leased. But Martha Choe quickly found lessons from the headquarters campus process that translate to every foundation office.

“I learned a tremendous amount about how important it is to understand how our staff work and what they need to have the best working environment to do their best work. Our work is at its core very similar across our regional offices in India, China, Washington, D.C., and London so our design principles translate well. The combination of spaces that allow for quiet focused time as well as for collaboration and informal connections are important in all our spaces.

“For example the D.C. office is just completing an expansion using the Seattle design and employees there love it!

“But, I’ve also recognized the importance of allowing each office to reflect the local cultural aspects. For example, our China office wanted to bring a sense of the Chinese culture, so you’ll see beautiful red carpets (red, a frequent color in Chinese décor) there and local art so our staff and visitors feel the consistency of a foundation feel but with a local consideration as well.”

Conclusion
Exploring innovative approaches, measuring results, learning from mistakes, and sharing knowledge are all stated elements of the Gates Foundation’s determined approach to the global challenges it has set about to address. That same open generosity was reflected in the time spent inviting The Rooftops Project into the new Seattle campus. There is a lot to learn.

Note: The personal interviews in this paper were edited for content and space. Quotations otherwise unattributed are taken from public print and Web-based communications of the Gates Foundation and are used here with permission.

Read More Right Here:
• See page 9 for excerpts from our interview about sustainability with NBBJ’s Margaret Montgomery.
• See page 10 for More from the Rooftops Notebook, additional points related to the Gates Foundation project team.

James Hagy is Distinguished Adjunct Professor at New York Law School and is the founder and director of The Rooftops Project at the Center for Real Estate Studies.

Additional Resources:
For more information on topics in this paper:
• The Gates Foundation Seattle Campus: www.gatesfoundation.org/500-Fifth/Pages/new-campus-headquarters.aspx
• LEED and the U.S. Green Building Council: www.usgbc.org
• LEED education and administration: www.gbci.org
• The benefits of nature in workplace environments: Peter H. Kahn Jr. Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington, The Human Relationship with Nature (paperback edition still in print from MIT Press, 2001)
• Marie Watt’s art in natural materials: www.mkwatt.com
• Janice Arnold’s work in felt: www.jafelt.com
Q&A with NBBJ about Sustainable Design

Margaret Montgomery, who oversaw sustainability in the design process, elaborates on sustainability in the Gates Foundation campus project. We also asked her about approaches used in this project that might translate into examples of for organizations of any size.

Q. The campus incorporates “green roofs,” something about which many organizations have curiosity but also many questions. Why did you choose to incorporate green roofs in your design? How complicated was it to achieve? How for example was increased weight load addressed? Was there a possibility of violating a traditional roof warranty?

A. “The green roofs were driven by several factors. Top among them was the desire not to replicate a parking lot from above, and to provide a better contribution to the neighborhood instead. Increasing habitat and reducing urban heat island effect are two key benefits of green roofs, and both are beneficial to this neighborhood adjacent to Seattle Center. The roof itself was not complicated—it did bump up the structural loading a bit, but the roof and living roof were specified together as a complete system, and warranties were not at risk.”

Q. Many not-for-profit organizations have told us that they are reluctant to adopt sustainable design features because they have a limited understanding of them and so find it hard to make choices. Others may feel that some technologies are experimental and not yet proven from an operational or a financial payback perspective. What thoughts would you have for them based on your extensive exploration of sustainable design in the campus project?

A. “We approached most of the strategies we used based on their overall contribution to the goals of the campus and the project. For sustainable outcomes, we were looking for the best occupant environmental quality, an improved local ecosystem, and a reduced contribution to climate change on a global scale (small as one campus is). We researched various technologies thoroughly, and one of the main foundation criteria was not to be ‘bleeding edge,’ and to incorporate technologies that had precedent and maintenance entities in the region so they would be assured that the building would meet their ongoing criteria for ease of use and good stewardship of resources. We found that setting a few key criteria—such as life cycle return on investment where applicable, maintainability, stewardship, and consistency with foundation values really helped us to make good decisions.”

Q. Sustainable design features can require large investments. Cost of installation (and operation) arises in our conversations with not-for-profits as constraints to the adoption of sustainable technology. You note that your team incorporated hundreds of sustainable solutions and materials in the foundation campus. Are there examples of solutions from your project that organizations of limited means might explore, either in new construction or in adapting their existing facilities?

A. “For energy systems especially, it’s important to evaluate the building holistically rather than looking at single line items. If the project has been integrated as it should be, no single element stands alone, but should work as part of a system. We look at ‘packages’ of strategies that achieve a result and evaluate them together.

“For instance, by spending some dollars on an exterior shading system (which wasn’t aesthetically a preferred choice in this particular case) and better quality glazing, a project might be able to downsize a cooling system and save enough money to offset the cost of shading. Sometimes owners go far enough to redo existing glazing, when it can take advantage of better visible light transmittance and insulting qualities in current high performance glazing. Most times, however, there’s a lot of benefit from some easier, less expensive or less-invasive upgrades.

“We’ve been involved in a healthcare multi-year study (a particularly challenging building type) where we’ve arrived at packages of strategies that will pay back in three to five years, creating positive cash flow from there on out. In these days, also, there are lots of possible incentives. Granted, not all are available to non-profits, but some may be available to third party providers. Power purchase agreements (PPAs), for instance, will allow a non-profit to contract for (renewable) energy at a fixed price through a third party who may provide and install the equipment on the premises and maintain and own it, providing a constant supply of energy to the building owner for years. Then the non-profit gains the benefit of the renewable clean energy but without the investment.

“There are also energy service companies (an “ESCO”) that may be interested in assessing the building and upgrading it if they operate it as well. In that scenario, the financial benefits would be shared, but the ESCO would incur the investment cost, not the organization. As architects, of course, we think engaging an architect to look holistically at the building upgrades and condition makes sense, as not all potential value is to be found in a mechanical system alone!”

Q. What simple ideas come to mind beyond energy and water usage?

A. “On other fronts, it’s quite mainstream to provide non-toxic and sustainable finishes and materials throughout a project without incurring any additional cost. This was a given for the foundation materials selection. This requires diligence in specifying and reviewing materials—paint, adhesives, composite words, and carpet systems—for VOC [volatile organic compound] levels, and other materials for recycled, local, or sustainably harvested content. It goes without saying that the standard requirements of durability, maintainability, and appropriate life span still apply.

“Good access to daylight and views may affect the footprint of a new building; the foundation buildings are 65 feet wide for this reason. However, good research has recently shown that the benefits of this strategy in stress reduction, brain stimulation, often sick time reduction, and increased job performance.”
More from the Rooftops Notebook

Every organization has much to learn and share about its projects. Here are additional points from the notebook of our visit with the Gates Foundation project team that may translate to your own organization’s approach to real estate.

Infusing Vendors with a Sense of Purpose: General contractor Sellen Construction showed workers a video of the Gates Foundation mission before they started their first day at the project. At the peak, more than 600 workers were on site. Teams worked together with a sense of the importance of the work done by the foundation and the contribution that the completed campus would make.

Melissa Milburn thinks this approach had a measurable effect on the result. “I was shocked that we moved in on time. I was absolutely shocked for this to happen with a building of this scope. Anybody who has done their kitchen would make.

Melissa Milburn notes research by Peter H. Kahn Jr. at the University of Washington that views of nature from an employee’s workplace can have both physiological and psychological benefits in promoting recovery from low level stress. Research by environmental psychologists also identified natural light as a benefit for staff recovering from jet lag, a frequent occurrence for Gates Foundation professionals.

Conservation of Lighting Energy: The project also adopts so-called “smart lighting,” in which room lights automatically dim in active spaces and in response to the levels of ambient light reaching the space.

Responsible Use of “Graywater” Resources: The term “graywater” is intended to describe excess water no longer suitable for drinking but that can be redirected to other productive purposes, usually on-site. Rain barrels are a common example of graywater conservation efforts by homeowners. At the Gates Foundation campus, even the public water fountain on the streetscape is designed so that excess water is diverted to adjacent plantings.

Evaluating Energy and Water at Every Facility: Melissa Milburn notes that consumption of utility resources isn’t limited to big or even new projects. “For an existing facility, there’s great benefit to be gained in reevaluating energy and water performance. There are usually low-hanging fruit to be picked, even in something so simple as relamping light fixtures. (And while doing so, it’s really easy to specify lamps with the lowest possible mercury content.) Often there are utility incentives for some of these simple measures, and any non-profit should start by contacting the local utility to learn what’s available.”

Outdoors as Work Environment: Foundation staff can work informally outdoors as easily as indoors. Melissa Milburn views “the entire campus as an extended workspace.” The campus is perimeter controlled.

Anne Cunningham elaborates: “The entire campus is designed to serve as an extended workspace for a highly flexible workforce; staff can turn outdoor benches into an office, and there are informal indoor/outdoor areas for team brainstorming sessions. The office space design is optimized for face-to-face collaborative connections with our staff in open office space and in private offices.”
“And different size meetings, too,” Melissa adds. “There are large tables where you can actually seat 20 people and have meetings at the far end of the campus. And then there are also smaller, four-seaters. We have made spaces so that as you traverse from building to building, there are always spaces available.”

This approach can be seen in other NBBJ Seattle projects, such as the Federal District Court for the Western District of Washington, a little more than a mile away. At that public project, the building footprint was minimized to allow outdoor areas ten times larger than what was required by the local zoning code.

Wireless Workplace: Making full use of the indoor and outdoor campus does not need to diminish accessibility. “The technology that we are using here we’re using in all of our offices,” explains Melissa Milburn. “The Lynx system we use is a phone system that rings through your laptop. So even if I am in down the courtyard doing some work, my phone will ring on my laptop. I will have my ear set and I’ll just answer my phone there. So I can answer my phone from anywhere on the campus, even if it rings at my desk.”

Protecting Birdlife in a Building with a Glass Curtain Wall: The extensive use of glass in a building’s exterior façade or curtain wall inevitably poses the challenge of how to avoid attracting or harming birds. Margaret Montgomery notes NBBJ’s approach to this problem. “The glazing is not reflective—which reduces one reason for collisions. We were also careful not to locate interior ‘gardens’ adjacent to outdoor habitats that would encourage birds to fly through attempting to get to the plants.”

Communicating with the Community: The foundation’s communications team produced a series of newsletters helping Seattle envision what the project would be like at completion and tracking its progress. Each newsletter was distributed [in print and by e-mail]; they are also archived and available on the foundation’s Web site.

Newsletters announced milestones in the project, such as the removal of the construction fence, allowing pedestrians at the perimeter to glimpse through the glass-enclosed portal to the outside spaces. The foundation also held a series of community meetings during the site’s development, followed by open-house self-guided “sneak peak” events for the public after the building’s completion. Even though the project is now completed, future newsletters will serve to inform the community about surrounding projects such as planned road redesign to improve access to nearby Interstate 5 and burying underground existing overhead utility lines.

The foundation’s communications team led these efforts. Melissa concludes, “We wanted to make sure that the neighborhood knew what was coming, how long it was going to last, and what impact it was going to have on their lives. That was really important.”

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