

Just released, the new code is designed to complement, not replace, existing green building tools. Will it move green building forward?

Assessing the International Green Construction Code

By Mark Rossolo



On March 28, 2012, the International Green Construction Code (IgCC) was officially released, ending a development process that lasted more than two years and encompassed thousands of volunteer hours by dedicated professionals committed to furthering the green building movement. However, the release of the IgCC comes with almost as many questions as answers. How will state and local jurisdictions adopt the code? Will it serve to ultimately move the green building forward, or simply provide yet another tool in an increasingly full toolbox?

Before answering these questions, it is helpful to review what the IgCC is and how it differs from the myriad other well-known green building tools, such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) from the U.S.

Green Building Council (USGBC) and Green Globes from the Green Building Initiative (GBI). Fundamentally speaking, the IgCC looks at very

similar criteria as more traditional tools such as LEED. They both look at the environmental impact of numerous categories, including site, energy, water, indoor environmental quality and material usage. The difference is primarily in how they are applied.

The most popular green building tools in the world (including LEED) are points-based, allowing users the flexibility to choose which credits to pursue based on their specific environmental goals and budget. Green codes, conversely, tend to have a lower overall bar, and the majority of credits are mandatory. There are positives and negatives to both. The more flexible rating systems incentivize users to achieve as many points as possible, thereby encouraging the incorporation and use of more cutting-edge sustainability technologies. However, because rating tools are points-based, there is the possibility for “gaming” the system. This involves installing a feature or technology into a building simply to get the points, even if it does not have any real environmental benefit to that particular building or surrounding area. Additionally, because of the flexibility allowed by points-based tools, two green buildings in the same region could be substantially different from one another, even though the buildings achieved a similar number of points using the same rating system.

As the IgCC is an actual building code, it is written in mandatory language, so a minimum baseline must be reached in each section. This mandatory language is good for helping raise the bar, but typically does not encourage the use of cutting-edge technology or new practices. Therefore, it is important that IgCC be adopted and used in a way that is complementary to rating systems, as opposed to being used as an alternative or replacement.

HOW WILL IGCC BE ADOPTED?

The IgCC brings the promise of raising the bar and making green building more accessible. What is still unknown, and one of the primary hurdles, is how and when the code will be adopted by local jurisdictions. Code approvals and changes vary by city and state depending on what the current laws and regulations require. An authority having jurisdiction (AHJ) is the entity that has responsibility for establishing minimum building and fire code standards as designated by current statutory requirements. Ultimately, the success of the IgCC will come down to how it is received and implemented by AHJs across the country. As written, the new code is not intended to be adopted in its entirety by a given jurisdiction.





Instead, it is designed with the intention of allowing AHJs to adopt the aspects of the IgCC that are most relevant for their specific region. Ideally, this flexibility will ensure that the baseline is moved up while preventing the building code from becoming burdensome and complicated for a typical building.

Even though the IgCC was just recently released, there has already been significant interest around the country by jurisdictions who wish to adopt it. In fact, even prior to its completion, Rhode Island, Maryland, Oregon and Florida passed some type of state legislation recognizing the IgCC and encouraging its use. Additionally, numerous cities have also gotten into the act by recognizing the green code in some type of city ordinance or other policy, including Portland, Ore., Phoenix, and Richland, Wash.

Interestingly, with the exception of Phoenix (and neighboring Scottsdale), none of these state or municipal jurisdictions has actually adopted the IgCC as it was intended. For example, the state of Florida added the IgCC as an option that can be used when new publicly-funded buildings in the state are built or retrofitted. Previously, Florida had required that new construction and major renovations must be certified to LEED, Green Globes or any equivalent green building rating system. Now, builders will have the option to use IgCC instead of the rating systems to show compliance with the law. However, it remains to be seen how this will actually be accomplished, given that rating systems such as LEED have a third party verification process in place to show compliance, whereas the IgCC does not.

WILL IGCC ACTUALLY MOVE GREEN BUILDING FORWARD?

The obvious and primary goal of the IgCC is to move green building forward by setting a minimum sustainability baseline and building off of it. However, if the code is not adopted and used as it was intended, there is a possibility it could actually hurt, or slow, the green building movement. And, if the early-adopters are any indication, that is a very real possibility. It appears as though the marketplace currently views the IgCC as more of a competitor (or at least alternative) to traditional green building tools such as LEED. As the code was developed to complement, not replace, existing green building practices, this confusion could be detrimental to the overall green building movement.

As we have seen, the IgCC is written to provide each AHJ the ability to adopt the specific sections of the code that are most relevant to their region. A number of factors determine which criteria each AHJ adopts within a building code and which criteria they leave out, including what is economically feasible. Therefore, showing consistency among buildings in various jurisdictions will be difficult, if not impossible. A building in Portland that uses the IgCC could have very different environmental attributes than a building in New York. They both may be technically built to the IgCC, but that will not necessarily mean they have a similar environmental

footprint. Ensuring that the marketplace understands this distinction will be critical to ensuring the success of the IgCC.

Similarly, it is extremely important that the marketplace understand that just because a building is built to the IgCC does not mean that it has the same environmental impacts as a building certified to a green building rating system (and vice versa). In the Florida example above, publicly funded buildings must meet LEED, Green Globes, IgCC or another equivalent green building rating system. However, while LEED and Green Globes are similar points-based rating systems, with similar tiers of achievement, the IgCC is essentially a pass/fail with no third party assessment process unless it is formally adopted into the jurisdictional building code. If a builder in Florida claims the building complies with IgCC as a means to avoid getting a LEED certification, how will the state verify compliance? And since the code was not meant to be adopted as is by any AHJ, what specific criteria will be used?

These are important questions that need to be answered before widespread adoption of the IgCC is achieved. If the marketplace continues to believe that the IgCC is simply another competitor in the increasingly muddled green building field, then the goal of moving the baseline up while still incentivizing builders to push even higher will likely not be realized. Instead, the IgCC could actually hurt the green building movement. Given the economy and the fact that new construction has been slow to recover, a green code that still complies with existing requirements, but is easier (and likely cheaper) to achieve is an attractive option. This will not help move the green building marketplace forward. Instead, it may produce a race to the middle (or even bottom) where builders are incentivized to do just enough to comply with the baseline green building code, but have no reason to go above and beyond.

As the green building marketplace continues to evolve and mature, we face the dilemma of how to move the minimum baseline up without removing the incentives that have pushed many builders to incorporate as many green building technologies as possible. The good news is that there is already a lot of interest, and the solution, while complicated, is not out of reach. Using the IgCC as the new baseline and ensuring that all new construction projects have a least a minimum amount of green features, while still encouraging the marketplace to go even further, is the ultimate goal. The tools are all in place and available, from green codes to green rating systems. Now we just have to make sure the right policies are put in place so that these complementary pieces can all fit together. ◀

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