

# Q&A with César Ulises Treviño



**“[Mexico has] regulations for energy efficiency, sustainable management of the site, and hazardous waste. But if you are talking about advanced ideas—indoor air quality, life-cycle analysis, or green building products—we are not there yet.”**

*César U. Treviño founded the Mexico Green Building Council (Consejo Mexicano de Edificación Sustentable) in 2005 and currently serves as its president. He is the first LEED-accredited professional in Latin America.*

**When was the Mexico Green Building Council [Mexico GBC] founded? When did it become a full member of the World Green Building Council [WGBC]?**

The council was conceived in 2003 and relaunched in 2005. Mexico GBC was a founding member of the WGBC.

**How many members does the Mexico GBC have?**

We have over 60 corporate memberships. Like the USGBC [U.S. Green Building Council], our corporate affiliates come from manufacturing, design and engineering, financial institutions, and other NGOs [nongovernmental organizations].

**When will the Mexico GBC launch its sustainable building rating system, Sistema de Calificación para Edificaciones Sustentables [SICES]?**

We had to put SICES on standby because we found that we didn't have enough relevant regulations that could go directly into a green building rating system and because third-party certifying and regulating bodies must be overseen by several public organizations. Hence, creating our own system would [require] updating existing norms and the development of new codes and even reshap-

ing legal frameworks. This effort will resume in a few years.

Meanwhile, to make an immediate impact, we knew we would be better off using a rating system that has international recognition and can be adapted to the Mexican market. So, we have a[n] agreement with the USGBC for Mexico. [The Mexico GBC] will be the entity in our country that offers official LEED workshops, seminars, and reference guides.

**How many buildings in Mexico have earned LEED certification?**

Still only two. The first building was the International Business Center [*Centro Internacional de Negocios* or CIN] in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, opposite El Paso, Texas. It is a 50,000-square-foot [4,600-sq-m] office building that earned a basic LEED certification rating in 2006.

The 32-story, 855,000-square-foot [80,000-sq-m] HSBC Corporate Tower in Mexico City earned a LEED Gold rating in 2007. [See “HSBC Constructs the First LEED Gold Building in Latin America,” *Urban Land*, April 2008.]

**Why have so few Mexican buildings earned LEED ratings?**

Earning LEED certification is a rigorous, time-consuming, and pricey process. The developers and investors have been waiting to see if it was actually possible to achieve a LEED building [here]. We had no experience in Mexico until recently. We are where the United States was five or six years ago.

When the HSBC Corporate Tower—a high rise located in a prominent location—got LEED Gold, people realized that it was possible to construct a LEED building in Mexico with domestic resources. We now have over 60 registered buildings countrywide.

**What is your experience with LEED in Mexico?**

Right now, using LEED is a burden in some respects. First is the actual cost of the registration and certification process. Second, we must translate from the U.S. [customary] system [of measurement] to metric units. Third, we must register and document projects in the English language. Fourth, we are to follow foreign codes and regulations

that most Mexican practitioners are not acquainted with. Fifth—the big challenge—is that we must work on education.

It is a challenge when you go from zero to the high-performance LEED system so fast. It's a big step. The market sees that LEED is a very effective transformation tool, but it [comprises] different codes and new players and environmental indicators—like indoor air quality plans, commissioning agents, green product labels, full energy modeling—that are not part of the conventional design and building practice in Mexico.

**What is some of the most widespread misinformation about green buildings in Mexico?**

The most common misinformation is the alleged extra cost of green design and construction. Some contractors or professionals claim that it is over 20 percent. That's a curious claim when they haven't done any green buildings or sustainable developments at all.

We are showing people that the truth is a much lower cost premium, even no extra cost, or even less cost than a conventional building, and operations savings. We are documenting those case studies.

For instance, the incremental cost for the LEED Gold HSBC Corporate Tower was 5 percent. That is below the U.S. cost premium of a few years ago for a LEED Gold high rise.

**How can the Mexico GBC surmount poverty, pollution, and governmental challenges to make sustainability efforts a vital part of Mexico's built environment, government policies, and business practices?**

The Mexico GBC is supporting green building at [the] local and national levels for all kinds of buildings—residential, commercial, and institutional. We are spreading the word of good practices and success stories. We are approaching municipal governments to explain the benefits [of] green building and infrastructure for them.

The Mexican government is taking some real actions to bring green to the entire population, and we are working with some governmental organizations.

For example, in Mexico we have the challenge of constructing 700,000 residential units a year to accommodate the rising population, and most of the housing is [for] low-income [residents]. The government wants some part of that new stock to be designed and built in a greener fashion. So, we are collaborating with Conavi [*Comisión Nacional de Vivienda*, the Mexican government's National Housing Commission, which is responsible for the promotion and development of housing policies in the country] to create new standards for green design and construction, with a focus on energy efficiency, water conservation, and better use of construction materials.

The private sector will build the housing with financial support from the government, and the government will offer low-interest loans to the homebuyers. The federal government through INFONAVIT launched [in 2008] a Green Mortgage Program where the developer is allowed about \$1,000 extra to put into green technologies for the housing.

#### **Are companies in Mexico supporting the shift to green?**

Corporations want their own facilities to have green certification, because it aligns with their corporate social responsibility [CSR] objectives and their environmental commitment, and it lowers their operational and maintenance costs.

#### **Are these Mexican or international companies?**

Both now. Two years ago, it was transnational companies located in Mexico. Now, CSR policies have gained [traction] in small and large companies in Mexico. They want to commit to sustainability in a tangible, real form.

#### **What are the major roadblocks to moving green buildings into the Mexican mainstream?**

Of course, the green costs that we talked about. That's a problem in so many nations.

We do have one real cost problem: Getting reasonably priced green building products that are not readily available in Mexico right now. We don't have formal Mexican manufacturers for zero-VOC [volatile organic compound] paints and sealants. We cannot find

high-performance kitchen appliances and air conditioners in our stores. If you want high-performance products, they must be specially ordered.

Do you want to know what really bothers me? Some high-performance products are being manufactured here for export, and we never get to see them. If we want them, we must pay for the import [from the countries where the manufacturers sell these products], shipping, and taxes. . . . That's pitiful.

The next roadblock is the availability of technical and professional resources. Right now, we really need professional education for every party engaged: architects, engineers, and builders.

If you don't have the education and information to understand the intent of the [LEED] credits, people get confused and they make decisions for projects [that] are not really effective.

Having the concept of integrated design as a part of green building development is key. We need to get our first lessons right. I wouldn't be surprised if the number of projects grows exponentially when it happens, just as it has in the United States over the past five years.

#### **Are current building codes and standards in Mexico a problem? Do they block or discourage green features in your country as some have done in many other nations, including the United States?**

We have building codes, about the type [and density] of building that can be constructed in a location. We have regulations for energy efficiency, sustainable management of the site, and hazardous waste. But if you are talking about advanced ideas—about indoor air quality, life-cycle analysis, green building products—we are not there yet. There are few regulations and the ones that we do have—like energy efficiency for commercial buildings—are followed neither by the design professionals nor by the developers. So, that's a frightening thing.

The government was also concerned about foreign building standards coming

into Mexico. They suggested that we should see how we could include our own existing domestic regulations into this LEED rating system and consider equivalent criteria in our building codes because, otherwise, the government reads that the market or building professionals are prioritizing foreign codes instead of national ones.

#### **How will the current global recession affect green buildings in Mexico?**

At this point in time [March 2009], green buildings are becoming a market differentiation opportunity for many developers. Yes, many projects are being halted or not started. But we see that the ones going forward are using better green practices.

Developers are now recognizing the value of green. And the users are becoming more aware of environmental issues. Green building is becoming a very attractive option during these difficult times.

#### **What advice can you offer other "emerging" members of the WGBC, like Argentina, Poland, and Vietnam?**

Focus on the assessment of regulations and responsibilities of public and private organizations, so the GBC can identify as soon as possible what roles they could play and how they can include themselves into the overall green construction in their country.

Become educators. Develop new regulations. Promote new projects. Gain greater support from corporations. Understand how to collaborate with other organizations.

[S]upport any government [green] program [but] take the lead on something else that the government is not doing.

Focus on a few issues. You cannot do everything. Focus your time and energy on what really matters. **ULG**

**CHARLES LOCKWOOD** is a green real estate authority and consultant in southern California and New York City.

*The Green Quotient* is available at [www.uli.org/bookstore](http://www.uli.org/bookstore), or by calling 800-321-5011.