

AIA Materials Matter Healthy Planet: Materials + the Environment

Session I write-up, by Louisa Gaylord

Materials Matter is the newest continuing education program offered by AIA's Seattle chapter. Building materials have a lasting impact on our world before, during and after the building's lifespan; to have truly sustainable communities, we need to consider what will happen long after a structure is vacated and demolished. To set the stage for the first or five session, presenters from Northwest Green Chemistry, the Washington Acidification Center and the Carbon Leadership Forum outlined the current state of our planet and why it's important to act quickly and responsibly.

Best practices are constantly evolving, and we are just now seeing the measurable environmental impact of past methods. Plastic, widely used because of its durability and cost effectiveness to produce, does not break down entirely in the recycling process. But plastic can leak toxic chemicals when heated, which continues once the building breaks down. Some materials, although found in nature, are manufactured in global conflict zones and not conducive to a sustainable world view. And the deteriorating health of the ocean will change how many materials are broken down and absorbed – or not absorbed – into the ecosystem.

A 2016 study published in Dodge Data and Analytics found that 88% of those surveyed care about removing harmful chemicals from building materials and furnishings. But a “banned list” of materials would be impractical because how and where it's used is everything. “Even water in the wrong context can be a problem,” explains [Dr. Lauren Heine](#) from Northwest Green Chemistry. “Architects spend a lot of time trying to keep water *out*. When you consider an alternative to a material, you really have to consider the context it will be used in.”

Many of the industry professionals who signed up for Materials Matter have attended similar AIA programs, particularly [Getting to Zero](#) series in 2015. “This subject will help me in understanding the big picture,” says Seattle-area architect **Michael Trower AIA and LEED AP**. “I use that framework for incorporating the results into projects.” **Beth Tyler AIA**, another local architect, adds, “The non-architect scientists were especially fascinating and informative!”

To understand how we can create better buildings in the future, it's important to learn about the current status of our world now: what works and what doesn't, how we can improve and how to do it in the most sustainable, conscious way. The Materials Matter sessions will delve deep into how our surroundings can affect our health, how to implement tracking systems for building materials, and how an individual can have an incredible impact on our world.