

SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE PHAROS PROJECT

A TOOL FOR
EVALUATING BUILDING
PRODUCTS MOVES
FORWARD

BY JEFF STEPHENS

UNVEILED AT THE 2006 GREENBUILD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE & EXPO in Denver, the Pharos Project, a building-products rating system and database developed by the Washington, D.C.-based Healthy Building Network, has gotten off to a slower-than-expected start. But what it lacks in speed, it may make up for in long-term effectiveness.

Perhaps for the first time, architects, designers and other specifiers will have a comprehensive database of products evaluated across multiple categories, including ones seldom used in building-product evaluations. While recycled content and IAQ categories are common, more advanced categories, including embodied energy, net water use, user exposures, climate change and corporate practices, are not. By organizing these multicategory evaluations into one visually understandable label, the project hopes to provide clarity, like the famed ancient Egyptian lighthouse for which it is named.

FINDING HEALTHY BUILDING MATERIALS

Designed as a searchable tool, the Pharos Project, www.pharosproject.net, is capable of organizing social and environmental information about product groups, such as carpet, and specific products within each group. Users can browse products by the Alexandria, Va.-based Construction Specification Institute's MasterFormat designation or by environmental and social attributes.

A very important Pharos Project feature is the in-depth discussion about product categories. It provides novice and experienced specifiers with an overview of the health, resource and social issues surrounding a specific product category. Using carpet as an example, the site discusses the manufacturing process and accompanying potential health issues stemming from adhesives, flame retardants and antimicrobial treatments. There also is discussion about material-resource issues, including raw-material usage and recyclability, as well as social issues, such as worker compensation.



Once fully populated, the Pharos Project database will provide a one-stop resource for quickly identifying the issues, concerns and opportunities surrounding product choices.

COLLABORATION

Widespread adoption of the Pharos Project rests on having a comprehensive database of evaluated products. The question that naturally arises is how fast organizers can complete thorough and credible evaluations. With thousands of possible building products, the project has the potential to collapse under its own weight. To address this issue, HBN has teamed with the Center for Clean Products and Clean Technologies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The center, with its potentially limitless supply of eager students, intends to serve as a workhorse for initial data input. Detailed product evaluations will be handled by HBN in-house technical experts.

The Pharos Project also is designed to tap into the expertise of users themselves. Using an editable format similar to that from the widely popular Web site, Wikipedia, users will be able to edit text, share experiences and knowledge about materials and products, add new products and upload data. Data then can be used to generate nutrition-like labels that summarize product and materials impacts.

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Another potential source of data is manufacturers and their testing affiliates; performance data is integral to any discussion of product sustainability. Also, in this hypercompetitive market for green-building products, manufacturers continue to seek third-party certifications of their environmental claims. These certifications naturally would be reflected in the Pharos Project database and factored into any product evaluation.

According to Tom Lent, technical policy coordinator for HBN, the organization is in discussions with product certifiers to incorporate completed certifications directly into the Pharos

Project database. Using standard database technology, product details, laboratory results and certification decisions could be imported directly to the Pharos Project, resulting in up-to-date information for users. The rise of the Pharos Project also may spell additional business opportunities for product certifiers, like Atlanta-based GREENGUARD Environmental Institute and Emeryville, Calif.-based Scientific Certification Systems.

Allowing manufacturer's claims about a product's environmental profile will be an important and necessary step for the Pharos Project, according to Lent; however, unverified manufacturer claims will be noted in the product's listing, and users will be encouraged to challenge and research this information and post their own results.

BUILDING A ROBUST DIRECTORY

While many users are anxious for a robust directory of evaluated products, others see value in taking a slow, deliberate and consultative approach. The initial project concept was for the Pharos Project to be primarily wiki based, or a collaborative Web site with users submitting the vast majority of data. That strategy has since evolved to have HBN staff populate the database using information entered and evaluated by its team.

Since its initial release, the Pharos Project has undergone beta testing from a mix of interested individual users and invited firms. The next version of the project, along with an updated Web site, recently was demonstrated at the 2007 Greenbuild International Conference & Expo in Chicago.

"The goal is to release a fully functional tool and robust database with hundreds of products across multiple categories by spring 2008," Lent remarks. Through foundation and grant support, the Pharos Project is expected to be freely available to general users, though some firms already have expressed interest in subscription versions of the database. These modified versions would allow firms to store product evaluations about specific products proposed for their projects.

A HERCULEAN ENDEAVOR

Creating a comprehensive tool for evaluating building products across multiple categories is a massive project—one not undertaken lightly. Through the hard work of organizations, like HBN, and building product users, like you, the beacon in the distance signaling the future of building-material selection grows brighter each day. 🌱

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