

Is It Too Easy Being Green?
Eco-Friendly Certification
Is Big With Builders, Tenants;
Critics See a 'Broken' System
By ALEX FRANGOS
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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THE 42-STORY Goldman Sachs tower in Jersey City, N.J., sits just feet away from the Hudson River, a major flyway for migratory birds. To keep white-throated sparrows and gray catbirds from smashing into the skyscraper at night, its architects devised a lighting system on the upper floors that doesn't distract the high-flying birds.

The special lighting isn't the only environmentally friendly feature in the grayish-blue tower, which is known as 30 Hudson Street but dubbed the "Coke Can" by Goldman employees for its rounded corners and flat top. Shrubs and bushes on the roof help cool the building, saving modestly on air-conditioning costs. And exterior lights face downward so urban stargazers can see more of the heavens. Still, critics question whether the Coke Can -- which didn't install more heavy-duty technology such as special heating and cooling systems -- is really any more energy-efficient than other buildings.

MAKING THE GRADE

Goldman Sachs's 30 Hudson Street was deemed "green," though it does little to cut energy use or pollution. See how the building was scored by the U.S. Green Building Council.

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- 'Green' Option Often Overlooked
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Eco-friendly, or "green," buildings are one of the most talked-about trends in the trillion-dollar U.S. construction industry. Boosters say that for a relatively small up-front cost, such buildings can be cheaper to operate. Though more attention is paid to pollution by cars, buildings today account for a third of U.S. energy use, 30% of greenhouse gas emissions, and 30% of raw material use. Americans spend 90% of their time indoors.

But unlike other so-called green products -- such as hybrid cars and compact fluorescent lightbulbs -- some green buildings are little more energy-efficient than traditional structures. Yet they manage to earn a coveted certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, a leading, private environmental organization.

While there are no tax credits or other obvious financial incentives to seek official green status, builders value the official certification for several reasons. In an era where marketers use the eco-friendly moniker to sell everything from face creams to blue jeans, tenants may favor an environment that's been singled out as more energy-efficient and

healthy. Certified green developers get a front-of-building plaque that announces them as good corporate citizens.

"Birkenstocks and beads have been replaced with the whiff of real money," says Auden Schendler, environmental affairs director for Aspen Skiing Co. and an early adopter of green building. He has recently become a critic of the Green Building Council, saying its certification program doesn't guarantee buildings are energy efficient. [Aspen Skiing Co.'s Snowmass Golf Clubhouse is certified 'green.' The building is heated and cooled by a heat exchanger submerged in a nearby pond.] Aspen Skiing Co.'s Snowmass Golf Clubhouse is certified "green." The building is heated and cooled by a heat exchanger submerged in a nearby pond.

Mr. Schendler and others are expressing skepticism as the Green Building Council's main certification program gains support from deep-pocketed builders such as the federal government, states, major corporations and institutions. California, Washington and Arizona have all promised that new state buildings will meet the group's standards. Major auto makers such as Toyota Motor Co., General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co. have or are building such buildings. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. opened a certified green store in July and PNC Financial Services Group Inc. is rolling out green bank branches.

More than 20,000 building professionals have passed the Green Building Council's accreditation test. But the high enthusiasm doesn't match the slow adoption rate: only around 300 buildings have been certified, and 3,000 are in the pipeline. Around 8% of buildings that sign up for the official green designation drop out of the certification process along the way.

Certification can cost anywhere from \$30,000 to \$150,000 for the administration and paperwork. Builders must keep records of where they procure materials and do tests on building systems to ensure they perform as advertised. They also must pay the Green Building Council around \$3,000 in fees.

Seeing the green designation go to the Coke Can -- as well as certain new court houses, schools, and high-rises -- has some supporters of the nascent green building movement questioning the award's validity.

At issue is the Green Building Council's checklist system that certifies projects as green. Some critics say the system gives too much weight to certain easy tasks, while giving the same weight to much more expensive ones.

The council is proud of the enthusiasm it has generated among developers, but acknowledges the certification program needs improvement. The group says updates are in development.

Under the current system, buildings get points for "green" features on the list, such as water management or use of natural sunlight. Builders get one point for installing a \$350 bike rack or an electric-vehicle recharging station that few might use. They score the same one point, however, for promising to obtain 5% of the building's energy from renewable sources such as wind or solar power. To win a green seal from the council, a building needs to earn 26 from a total of 69 possible points.

Rafael Pelli, a principal with Cesar Pelli & Associates, the architects of the Goldman building, notes that the inexpensive task of putting metal floor grates at the entrance to reduce particulate matter in the air is worth one point. But only two points are given for increasing the efficiency of the heating and cooling system by 10% -- something that can cost tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the size of the building.

On the one hand, Mr. Pelli lauds the Green Building Council's program as a "remarkable advancement," and says part of its success is that it has broadened the definition of green building beyond simple energy efficiency. But he also says the program is "rather cumbersome" and "needs to be made better," especially in the way it gives weight to certain building features. Mr. Pelli declined to comment directly on the Coke Can. A Goldman Sachs spokesman said the company is pleased that the Coke Can has been recognized by the Green Building Council, and that it is "committed to energy efficiency and the environment."

Mr. Schendler of Aspen Skiing cites a ski lodge restaurant he built several years ago. Constructed in 1999, the restaurant was among the first projects to meet the Green Building Council's certification standards. Though the restaurant did reduce outdoor lighting to mitigate light pollution and used native grass outside instead of sod, it didn't do much in the way of energy efficiency.

"The issue of our time is climate change, and that's all about energy use," says Mr. Schendler. He calls the certification program "broken," saying that getting the certification, not constructing environmentally-sound buildings, has become the primary goal among some builders. He considers his own ski lodge project, as well as the Goldman tower, to be "mediocre 'green' buildings." Mr. Schendler says he could have won a point for painting the ski lodge roof white to avoid the "heat island effect," in which dense clusters of buildings drive up temperatures in urban areas, not "8,000 feet up in the Rockies."

Rick Fedrizzi, president of the Green Building Council, concedes that the system has room for improvement. "This is the Wild West phase of our maturation," he says of the seven-year-old program. The consensus-based group, which is governed by volunteer committees and has 6,000 member organizations, develops revisions often, much as a software company patches holes in applications. "Some of the credits are kind of distorted," he says, adding changes will arrive as soon as this fall. But a major revision is three to five years away.

Jeff Remtema, director of sustainability at Progressive Architecture & Engineering, a 150-person design firm in Grand Rapids, Mich., has worked on more than 10 certified projects, and remains a "huge supporter." But lately he's actively discouraged some clients, especially smaller ones, from pursuing the group's standard because of the time and cost to complete the required forms. "I'd much rather spend the money installing photovoltaic cells or a green roof than spending my time filling out papers."

Write to Alex Frangos at alex.frangos@wsj.com