

# Greening a Public School: Mayw

## The Architect Perspective: Interview With Loi Thai, LEED AP, WLC Architects, Inc.

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Catlin O'Shaughnessy, McGraw-Hill Construction research and marketing analyst, reports on her January 2007 interview with Loi Thai of California's WLC Architects, Inc. Thai was a member of the design leadership team for Maywood Academy High School, a public school in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which opened its doors in fall 2006.

Maywood Academy was one of the first schools built in accordance with California's Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS) certification guidelines. Drawing on his extensive background in civil construction projects and LEED® certified sustainable construction, Thai gives feedback on the difficulties facing green construction projects with public school budgets.

**In many public school districts, there are pre-established relationships with preferred architects or firms. Was that the case with Maywood, or did your firm bid on the project?**

Prior to the project, we did have an established relationship with the LAUSD. However, as this particular project was a “showcase project” for CHPS, it required higher achievement levels for their point system, so we did have to bid. At the time, our company already had some LEED experience from other projects, and, following the Maywood project, we have become involved in three other schools in LAUSD that are seeking CHPS certification.

**What was your experience of working with CHPS on the Maywood project? How did it compare to the work you've done with LEED certification?**

My experience working with CHPS was very positive. I found it to be substantially easier than LEED, in the sense that we didn't have to do a whole lot of documentation. It is self-certified, but not without oversight. We have owners to look over what we're doing. Also,

there were some consultants from CHPS early in the project who were there to...take us through the process. This was very helpful, to the point where we have not required additional consultants on the more recent CHPS projects that I've been involved with. We have been able to bring this experience to our work with other school districts to help educate the owners on building green.

**What were some of the other challenges that you faced during the Maywood project?**

The biggest challenge with this project was that everybody on the team faced a very steep learning curve. The project started back in 2000, when CHPS was pretty new to both the community and the consultants. But it turned out to be a great opportunity for all of us to learn together. We as the leadership design team went through extensive training and learning. We got involved with the utility companies as well. We worked with the Southern California Gas Company and Edison to come up with some design ideas and strategies to incorporate in the project to achieve the same level of energy conservation.

Other than that, there were some challenges with the contractor: We had to sort of walk them through in checking the specifications to ensure they were using the correct products. There was a bit of a challenge in finding the specified projects and ensuring their usage, and we ended up needing to do some substitution.

**How were the decisions made regarding the most important elements of green building to incorporate into the school design?**

The school district's main interest was in student performance, so there was a great emphasis on the indoor environmental quality aspects of the building. There was also an emphasis on reducing operational costs. With LAUSD being such a large district, it has several different departments. The con-

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Maywood Academy, Los Angeles, California

struction department helped us a lot in reducing the amount of man-power to do research on materials. This was a big challenge at the time, because green building was still new, and everybody had so much to learn.

Aside from student performance in school, there are the aspects that the owners can't see, the stuff that is behind walls or out of the way. For the designer, selecting the correct materials for the project is the most important green element, as well as employing design strategies, like controlled lighting.

**What kinds of changes have you seen in your role as an architect on green civic projects since sustainable building practices have become more common in the years since you first worked on Maywood?**

It has become easier for the design team, in terms of the availability of materials. In terms of the owner side, it varies. LAUSD is pretty progressive, as it is part of their policy to make all of their schools green. But looking at other districts, smaller ones where they don't have the people or the money to dedicate staff to this area, they are often pretty much dependent on the consultant or the architect to educate them on the process. They are also very dependent on the different costs.

**What would you say to fellow architects at your firm who perhaps are hesitant about getting involved in green building?**

I would say that it is worth it in the end. I was actually lukewarm in the beginning about sustainable design. But having gone through it, I think it is going to be the thing of the future, and it does have a certain level of self-gratitude. Going through the process is trying, a bit more difficult, as you have to go through the learning process and the learning curve, but at the end you get to see the benefits, both for the student performance and also from the design side. I like using recycled products and materials and just knowing that there is a benefit for a larger community. It feels good.

At my firm, most of our work is on public, civic projects, fire stations, community centers, city halls, police stations and so forth. We get a lot of satisfaction from building these kinds of structures. Especially with schools, there is a lot of community involvement. On Maywood, there was involvement by parents, students and district staff. They were really excited about it. Just to have a school is exciting for them, but for them to know that the school can be green, with all of those benefits, they were very enthusiastic. ■

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