

Guiding Lenses

Our guiding lenses provide a way to “see” and evaluate a new program, partnership or idea for the Center. We look at these opportunities in seven different ways; an opportunity must:

- 1) meet our vision, mission, and board approved strategic plan
- 2) satisfy our educational goals and rationale,
- 3) address at least one of our established issues,
- 4) be deemed financially and operationally feasible,
- 5) be judged as an environmentally sustainable decision,
- 6) engage the community to fill community needs
- 7) be fun, creative, or “cool”



See Guiding Lenses at work: [Guiding Lenses for Building](#)

1) Mission

The Urban Ecology Center educates and inspires people to understand and value nature as motivation for positive change, neighborhood by neighborhood. Our environmental community Centers:

- Provide outdoor science education for urban youth
- Protect and use public natural areas, making them safe, accessible and vibrant
- Preserve and enhance these natural areas and their surrounding waters
- Promote community by offering resources that support learning volunteerism, stewardship, recreation, and camaraderie
- Practice and model environmentally responsible behaviors

2) Educational Program Goals – To encourage responsible behavior toward the environment as a lifestyle choice and to instill a sense of awe and personal connection to nature; to touch the heart of students as well as the mind. Methods used to achieve these goals:

- Contact: Maximize contact with nature in an ongoing and consistent way throughout one’s life
- Mentoring: Provide environmentally respectful mentoring relationships from within the community
- Resource: Share information and resources related to mission, issues and program goals
- Modeling: Center staff, volunteers and organization as a whole model environmentally responsible behavior

3) 10 Issues — In the fall of 2005 ten issues were selected by the Urban Ecology Center board of directors and staff as key issues impacting the sustainability of urban ecosystems. This list was updated and modified in 2008. We use this lens to

evaluate the types of programs we offer each year and the curriculum we create for the schools that we serve. Programs should be balanced between, and encourage appreciation and understanding about, the following topics:

- Clean water – Key areas to promote: water conservation; storm water best management practices; improve water quality (fishable, swimmable, drinkable)
- Climate and climate change -- Key areas to promote: clean air; carbon reduction
- Energy – Key areas to promote: renewable sources; conservation
- Transportation -- Key areas to promote: urban mass transit; human powered transport; reduction/elimination of fossil fuel dependence
- Food – Key areas to promote: local and organic production and sources; reduction of meat consumption; reductions of packaging and transport; affordable healthy options available to all
- Consumption – Key areas to promote: resource conservation and re-use; local and sustainable product choices; waste reduction/elimination
- Healthy living – Key areas to promote: safe products; healthy food; outdoor recreation (combating obesity, attention fatigue etc.)
- Land-use – Key areas to promote: preservation and development of green spaces; smart growth; urban living; water considerations
- Environmental Justice – Key areas to promote: addressing, understanding and reducing the unequal impact of environmental problems on social groups (especially minorities); addressing, understanding, and reducing unequal representation in environmental issues
- Biodiversity – Key areas to promote: urban wildlife diversity; native plant diversity; reducing/eliminating harmful invasive species

5) Sustainability – would people seven generations from now approve of this activity or decision? Would the black-crowned night heron approve of this decision?

6) Community – The Urban Ecology Center evolved out of the neighborhood, belongs to the community and is integrated within the city. In “Uniting Environment and Community”, the Urban Ecology Center will:

- Remain open to all people, encouraging public participation and volunteerism
- Engages the community to fill community needs (added 5/18/09)
- Use the environment to bring together people of diverse backgrounds
- Serve as a voice for the natural community in the city
- Focus on the neighborhood

7) Fun – creative, playful and/or “cool” – Is it?

Guiding Lenses for Building

A building is really just a million decisions. With every decision that went into building the Urban Ecology Center, we asked the question “How does this decision affect the environment?” However, this was not the only question asked. Every decision we made was passed through a series of six “lenses” that reflected our values and led to a finished product we could be proud of.

- 1) Program and Fun Factor -- Can we make this decision in a way that will positively impact our organizational program offerings? Is there a way this could make our space more fun? For example, we chose to enhance the use of our space by painting a large scale map of our watershed on our concrete floors. We can now use these floors as a teaching tool.
- 2) Budget -- Can this choice be made in a way that helps our budget? This question was asked cyclically throughout the Urban Ecology Center project, which helped optimize creative opportunities to make the project funding go farther. Is there a way to save money through this choice, without a negative impact on the sustainability of the final product? We used a recycled one hundred year old hardwood maple floor, which was not in perfect condition but added character to our space and also saved us money.
- 3) Environment -- If our great-great grandchildren, seven generations out, were sitting here at the table with us, would they approve of this decision? This future-tense question was accompanied by a more immediate concern: If the black-crowned night heron nesting on the Milwaukee River had a presence at the table, would she approve? With this consideration, we chose to use linseed oil and other natural finishes as an alternative to more toxic wood finishes and paints containing Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). (An unexpected benefit of this decision is that visitors often comment about how “fresh” our building smells.)
- 4) Politics -- Is this decision in keeping with a culture of respect for our neighbors? Since the Urban Ecology Center is located on government land and near residential neighborhoods, this filter came into play especially with questions of building placement and the height of our observation tower. It also covered such issues as making sure the kitchen was up to code, which prevented use of a particular eco-friendly flooring product. Labor practices of some building product manufacturers also came into play.
- 5) Aesthetics -- Will this be aesthetically pleasing? We wanted people to come back over and over again, and we didn't want to sacrifice beauty for a purely functional, sustainable building. For example, we chose cedar window treatments over alternatives that were less visually interesting. Although the cedar was considered a sustainable choice, it was not the most environmentally friendly option available to us, nor the cheapest, but in this case we thought the look was important.
- 6) Time -- How can we make this decision in a way that keeps the project on schedule without costly delays? If you spend a lot of time looking for the best green building product, this delay can significantly increase the overall cost. This time consideration effectively created running deadlines for the Urban Ecology Center in our searches for building materials.