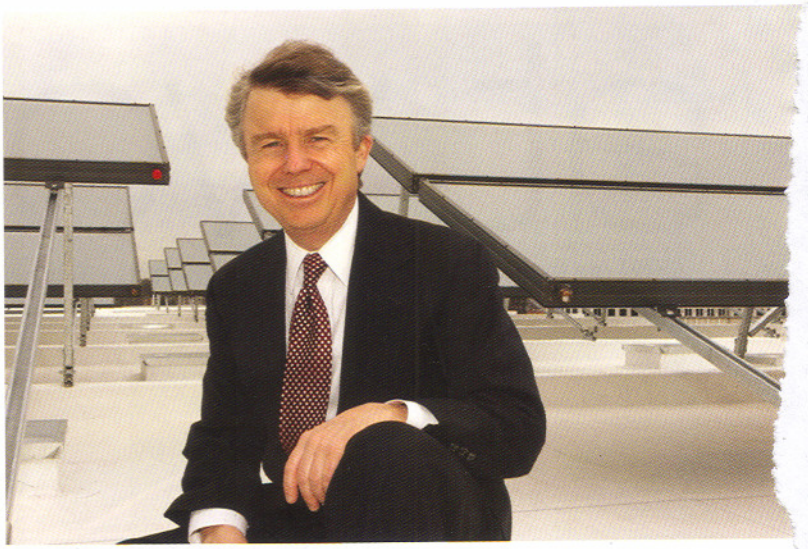
At Work with Dennis Quaintance

This spunky, 35-year veteran of the hospitality industry is leading the way in green hotel design with the opening of the first LEED Gold hotel in the country. And—guess what—it's not in San Francisco or Portland or New York City.



WHO: Dennis Quaintance, Partner, Quaintance-Weaver Restaurants and Hotels

WHERE: Greensboro, North Carolina

WHY: His new hotel, the 147-room boutique property called The Proximity, is the first in the country to be certified LEED Gold.

Organic Spa: How long have you worked in the crazy hotel industry?
Dennis Quaintance: For 35 years. My first job was at the Village Motor Inn, overlooking the University of Montana in Missoula. I was a housekeeper's assistant. It was good for me because I grew up fairly poor, I didn't know I might have potential for anything. I learned from working at the hotel that I could do this—all you've got to do is satisfy what these people want. It's reasonable and predictable.

OS: Flash forward. Tell me about your first hotel.
DQ: My first hotel, which I own with partners, is the O'Henry in Greensboro. It's a great, traditional hotel.

OS: But the next one, The Proximity, isn't traditional at all, and it's also LEED (a Green Building rating for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold. Why did you decide to do that?
DQ: I think our progeny are going to be really pissed off at us, at how we used all these resources and left them with a dirty river to clean up.

OS: Did this thinking coincide with the birth of your children?
DQ: Oh yes. If we wouldn't have had children I am not sure I would've thought about this.

OS: What do you like about LEED?
DQ: LEED is baby steps and very smart. It has categories—soil erosion, water usage, energy consumption, recycled building materials, and the like—and in each category there are prerequisites. Once we got into this, I just think that I started seeing all these things we could do.

OS: What are some of the things you did?
DQ: We'll have the first elevators in the country to generate electricity for the descent on the ascent. The brake is a generator, and the by-product of the resistance is the creation of electricity. We'll only use 30 percent of the energy that a typical elevator uses.

OS: What are some things you did for LEED that you wouldn't have thought of doing otherwise?
DQ: We would not have known to use fly ash—spent coal—in the concrete. It didn't cost any extra because it's considered waste and is delivered to the contractor for free. I didn't know we could specify recycled content in sheetrock and it wouldn't cost more.
Seventy-five percent of the construction waste that we generate has been recycled. I wouldn't have thought to do that. We wouldn't have thought to use geothermal to offset the heat generated by refrigeration for the kitchen. We have six wells under the parking lot with incredibly quiet pumps that pump water 400 feet into the earth, where it's cooled naturally. It is more energy efficient to cool a compressor with water than with air. I wouldn't have known to use a white roof to reflect light. Even with all those solar panels up there.

OS: Did it cost more to do this?
DQ: The whole project is $27 million, but in terms of the LEED items, almost everything has its own return—between energy savings, low interest loans on some of it, and some tax credits for renewable energy sources.

OS: What advice do you have for others on the fence about LEED versus non-LEED?
I'd look them in the eye and say: If you don't get your head under the hood of this puppy and think about sustainable practices with your building, you might build a building that will be functionally obsolete. If you want to flip it fast, go ahead. If not, I think there will be so much change in building technology in the next 15 years that you might be building the last cars without airbags. *www.proximityhotel.com* —*Rima Suqi*