

Fairfield Inn and Suites is first in Baltimore to reach LEED environmental standard

By Andrea Sachs
Washington Post Staff Writer
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At the Fairfield Inn and Suites in downtown Baltimore, I couldn't wait to use the bathroom. But not for the usual reasons.

The Marriott hotel, which opened in July, is the city's first to earn gold LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, the coveted stamp of approval from the U.S. Green Building Council. The hotel abides by the highest conservation standards, from its repurposed building (it inhabits the former Baltimore Brewery Co. and townhouses) to its breakfast condiments (the cream cheese is produced with renewable energy). In the guest bathrooms alone, the Earth-friendly checklist is long and involved: There are "plastic" cups made of plant material, 100 percent recyclable toilet paper and tissues, extra aeration faucets, water-conserving shower heads (choose "spring rain" or "fire hose") and toilets with two flushing options.

I understood the toilets in theory but was stumped in practice. I'm untrained in the volumetrics of flushing, but it seemed to me that the same amount of water swirled in the bowl whether I pressed the small button on the right or the large one on the left. When I called the front desk for assistance, I was referred to the engineer. But first a houseman paid a visit, and together we flushed the toilet once, twice, three times, without uncovering the secret. Then the engineer stopped by, and again we watched the toilet roar multiple times. He convinced me that the amount of water was different, delicately suggesting when I should employ the lighter whoosh of water and when a stronger push was necessary. As I pondered the efficacy of the toilet, I realized how much water I had just wasted in an effort to conserve.

"I think it's hard for people to know what's green and what isn't," said Tony Milo, a roof consultant visiting from California. "A lot of people don't know what LEED is, unless they're in the environmental industry."

Indeed, when I entered my room, my eye was drawn not to the nontoxic paint or the fluorescent bulbs but to the bold palette and patterns of the fabrics, which I dubbed Marimekko rain forest; the cloudlike bed; and the large flat-screen TV. I felt myself turning from grass to dirt.

"You don't have a sense that it's green unless you read the literature," said Stuart Kaplow, chairman of the Maryland chapter of the USGBC. "The hotel just looks like a fun, cool place to stay in."

The Fairfield Inn, thankfully, does not proselytize its green message. Its teachings are subtle. Recycling bins are inconspicuously placed around the property, and a fact sheet in the room (on the last page, after the restaurant menu) explains the various eco-features.

For instance, the former brewery grain silo in the courtyard, an outdoor space with cushioned seating, a fire pit and a mural of lacrosse players, collects rainwater that's used to irrigate the landscape. The small patch of artificial turf, which under bare feet tickles like plastic fringe, is made from recycled tires. On the rooftop of the Great Room, where breakfast is served, a garden of low shrubs reduces stormwater runoff and radiant heat, and beautifies some guests' city views.

Curious about whether the green ethos flowed into Tavern 101, the hotel's restaurant, I asked an employee to help me parse the menu. Jackie enthusiastically explained how the kitchen relies on sustainable and local sources. The meat, for example, comes from a nearby Fells Point butchery, and the baked goods travel only a few blocks to reach diner's tables. Though international, the wine list leans toward organic, and the beer options include a handful of local brews as well as the gluten-free Green's Discovery. (Taster's review: Gluten is

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Appreciating the hotel's efforts, I decided to do my part as well, making a concerted effort to leave nothing behind. Straightening up my room before checkout, I grabbed the plastic recycling bag from the bathroom and, as instructed, filled it with newspapers, plastic cutlery, bottles, glass and paper. According to an informational card, one ton of recycled paper protects 17 trees. With my contribution, I believe I saved a twig.

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