

Decider's Wisconsin Film Festival preview: Green constructs

This documentary from the makers of *King Corn* tackles "green" building



By Erika Janik March 31, 2009

In the weeks leading up to the Wisconsin Film Festival (April 2-5), Decider will be taking a look at movies slated for the festival's roster. See the complete schedule [here](#). (Find other Decider previews [here](#).)

Filmmakers Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis last hit the Wisconsin Film Festival in 2007 with their documentary *King Corn*. This year they return with [*The Greening Of Southie*](#), which, while far less entertaining, takes an evenhanded and incisive look at the contradictions involved in "green" building. Greening tells the unlikely story of the [Macallen Building](#), the first green building in the traditionally working-class neighborhood of South Boston, or "Southie." Cheney examines in detail how the project earned enough environmental-friendliness "points" to achieve a gold LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating, breaking down a complex process into its constituent parts.



With its sloping glass roof and recycled materials, the astronomically expensive Macallen building prompts everyone from construction workers and environmentalists to neighborhood business owners to reflect on the future of the city. Cheney remains relatively neutral, portraying the process rather than passing judgment, though there are plenty of disconcerting moments that speak for themselves. Early in the film, as the workers are learning more about the project and what it means to build "green," one worker asks a representative of the consulting firm in charge of the project what is the purpose of the LEED rating. Taken aback, the representative says he doesn't know and that it's just a goal that was set for the project, a moment that reveals that Macallen's greenness is as much financially as benevolently motivated.

The film can bog down at times in lingering images of saws, cranes, and big trucks—a little boy's fantasy—but the finer details raise more questions. It is unclear how the building can earn LEED points for using local materials, such as the concrete brought in from nearby Waltham, but doesn't lose any points for using materials from far away. Instead, the building is rewarded for using bamboo floors from China, toilets from Australia, and wood from Bolivia—products that may be environmentally friendly but still have an environmental cost.