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Storytelling Approaches for Creating Agreement

Many people are unaware of, or actively avoid understanding, their role in climate change through construction. They may have differing opinions about climate change. They may believe that they cannot make a difference with their project, or that someone else has more responsibility to fix the climate problem. They may perceive that low-carbon design costs more and requires them to sacrifice their money or their project wish list.

Do not give up too easily. You can create agreement through storytelling despite their initial point of view.

The process starts with asking your clients about their climate goals. Let them talk and then ask more questions. Remain positive and give them the space to tell you about their position and willingness to support your own goals. Investigate differences of opinion to discover the reasons behind their position so you can meet them where they are and begin to map out a path to mutually beneficial and climate-positive actions.

Telling a compelling story can help you balance the importance of climate action to any financial burdens and programmatic concerns. Tying the story of lower carbon emissions to your client's own story can create emotional resonance and commitment between your client and your sustainability goals. Including visual aids helps to "show, don't tell." Use diagrams, slides, or case studies. Make the invisible visible through metaphor.

Keep the story about their life, their values, and their self-image. Always give them agency to be the protagonist who makes the wise choice.

Even if you cannot inspire a substantial change in your client's views, you can still make small reductions that avoid their objections, like 1:1 material swaps that do not impact the budget or design using fewer materials. Find the sweet spot between their goals and yours that makes everyone happy.

Here are six storytelling approaches to use to make persuasive presentations:

1. The Legacy Story

Frame the building as a character in a multi-generational tale. This taps into our deep need to be good ancestors. Show them how their building becomes a burden future generation must retrofit and apologize for, instead of a gift for which they'll be grateful.

*"Your grandchildren will walk through these doors in 2075.
--What world will this building have helped create?"*

2. The Health and Sensory Journey

Take clients through a day in their life within their building. Describe the quality of light, the comfort of stable temperatures, the freshness of air. Compare this viscerally to conventional buildings.

Connect embodied carbon to respiratory health, heat waves affecting their employees, the psychological weight of working in a building that extracts rather than restores.

"Remember that stuffy conference room where you got drowsy at 2pm? That's what we're designing away from."

3. The Risk Narrative

Position sustainable design not as idealism but as insurance. Tell the story of buildings that became obsolete or unmarketable because they were energy hogs. Show how regulations are tightening, how tenants increasingly demand green certifications, how resale values are diverging.

"Do you want to own the asset everyone will want in 2035, or the one they will avoid?"

4. The Community Character Story

People care deeply about their legacy within their community. Help them see themselves as a protagonist in their neighborhood's story.

"This corner has been here for 120 years. Your building will define it for the next fifty. Are you the one who extracted, or the one who contributed?"

5. The "What This Money Really Buys" Reframe

Instead of talking about cost premiums, tell the story of what they are purchasing. Make it a story about foresight vs. short-sightedness, sophistication vs. obsolescence.

"You are investing a small premium in better materials now, that will bring you decades of lower operating costs, happier occupants, and marketing differentiation."

6. The Avoided Culpability Story

This is delicate but powerful: it helps clients see themselves in the story of climate impact. Not with shame, but with agency. Give them a way to be the hero who made the harder, better choice.

"Every ton of embodied carbon we specify is a choice we're making together. Let's choose to be part of the solution."