Environmentalists embedded in the real-estate industry are throwing stones at New York’s new glass towers.

They want new minimum standards for wall insulation that could force many architects to shrink the extra-large windows that account for much of the appeal of the new buildings.

Under the city’s current energy code, the energy loss through glass-clad buildings can be offset through upgrades to more efficient heating, cooling or lighting systems.

But an organization known as the Urban Green Council is urging a separate energy-efficiency standard just for the building exteriors.
The Green Council wants the amount of transparent glass in buildings reduced in favor of heavily insulated solid walls or replaced with advanced glass systems that are still much more expensive. High energy use associated with the use of clear glass degrades air quality and exacerbates global warming, according to a report released this month by the council.

"They built better walls in the middle ages," the council said in a new report that looked at insulating properties of ancient and modern buildings.

Over the last decade, slender new glass towers have changed the Manhattan skyline and redefined the Williamsburg waterfront in Brooklyn. Apartment buyers and office renters love the natural light, and open views, far above the noisy city streets.

Extell Development Co., the developer of a number of prominent tall glass towers, including the 1,004-foot-tall One57 on West 57th Street, said the city's current energy-performance system had worked well.

"This is a very good system that allows designers to make design decisions instead of having regulations determine the aesthetic of buildings," an Extell spokesman said.

Extell isn't currently represented on the Urban Green board, though employees of other large residential and commercial developers and building owners are members. The group also draws funding and its board membership from architects and construction companies involved with scores of glass towers in New York and around the world.

While the Urban Green Council has a track record of changing city building policies, it hasn't gotten far when it comes to glass buildings.

Nicholas Holt, an architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP and an Urban Green board member, said expansive views and light are important to "human health and enjoyment of the space." As a result, he said, "glass is not going anywhere."

"There are going to be predominantly glass buildings into the future for a long time to come," he said.

But he said that the quality of glass systems is gradually improving and getting more energy-efficient. Meanwhile, the cost of some more-energy efficient options—such as triple pane glass—is falling.
Richard Cook, a partner in CookFox Architects, who works closely with Urban Green, said that in both office buildings and apartments, big windows help people "feel more of a connection to nature that is offset with the energy performance issues."

Alexander Schnell, a spokesman for the city's Department of Buildings, called the Green Council proposal a "great start to an industrywide conversation with all stakeholders about where we could find even greater efficiencies in future energy codes."

The city requires buildings with more than 40% glass windows to meet standards based on an overall energy use model for the building. Architects say some of the new glass towers have up to 70% windows or transparent walls.

In 2010, Urban Green proposed a formula to limit heat loss from walls for buildings erected after 2016, with even stricter standards in ensuing years. It was part of 111 recommendations of a city task force led by the council, of which 51 eventually were adopted. Those included local laws to strengthen the city's code for heat-reflecting roofs and to enlarge the size of solar shades on new buildings.

Russell Unger, executive director of the council, said the heat-loss plan went nowhere. "There was a consensus that what we proposed was too steep, and got steeper far too quickly," he said.
Since then, the staff has come back with a series of reports. One titled "Seduced by the View" argued that occupants of glass towers weren't aware of the hidden energy costs and didn't take advantage of the views and light. In a survey, the report found that 59% of all window areas were covered by shades during the day.

Mr. Unger lives in a limestone row house in Prospect Heights and says that he has no aesthetic objections to glass buildings. He said his parents had lived in a glass-walled apartment, and liked the skyline, though they found the apartment very hot. They didn't have much privacy, he said.

Mr. Unger said the staff has been pressing for tighter rules on building facades, operating with "general support on the board for our direction" even though, he said, it may create a level of discomfort "among some board members."

http://online.wsj.com/articles/trying-to-put-more-green-in-glass-towers-1405129234