

Feature: Solar Days

Sunny days ahead

'Solar Days' paints the city green

By Reshma Mehra



Sesam Business Consultants' core business is to help companies to set up operations in this market. Much of this means setting up networks for people and companies. As it happens, many of the companies it represents have a strong green ethic, which tended to be lost on the UAE and GCC markets. But with the help of conferences, seminars and small-scale round-table discussions, Sesam has been able to bring people together and provide a marketing platform for the green companies that it assists in its endeavour to reach its audience. The most popular

of these conferences has been Solar Days — a conference aimed at educating students and professionals on the uses and benefits of solar energy. We spoke to Philipp von Zitzewitz, senior consultant at Sesam about the impetus behind Solar Days and the company's plans for initiating an understanding of green technology in the future.

Q: Tell me a little bit about Solar Days. How did it start? What was the purpose and why did you choose to host the conference at this time?

PvZ: The whole thing started in 2008. We realised that we could further popularise

on the green building trend, which was initiated by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum [Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai], when he issued a decree that all buildings should be green. We deal a lot with German companies and newcomers to this market and some of them had green products that they wanted to market in this region. It was difficult for them because people did not appreciate 'green' living at the time.

We already liked the idea of being environment-friendly and we thought there was

a need for education in the field; additionally, our clients needed help with marketing their products in the region. With people (including industry professionals) not being sufficiently aware of green building and living practices, we realised that one way of affecting these three parties was by setting up conferences.

So, in February 2008, we had our first conference in association with American University Dubai. We organised a second conference in June 2008, which was a great success again. We followed it with another event in Abu Dhabi.

Q: How would you say the conferences have grown since last year?

PvZ: Last year, it was very important to us to raise awareness of green building and green building standards in general. We found that most people, even some architects, weren't even aware of what it was.

This year, we wanted to go a little deeper and educate more than just make aware. We broke the subject of green building into smaller blocks. So the first part of this education campaign was 'Solar Days'. It will be followed by 'Water Days' in July, then Sustainable Architecture and Daylight, and finally, we'll have one on Energy Systems. The idea this year is to explore each aspect of green living by using the platform of conferences. We have enriched the conference with a workshop so that people have a wider range of learning tools as well as the opportunity to learn in a more intense and hands-on environment.

Q: To what extent were people interested in harnessing solar power during Solar Days?



The Solar Days conference held at the Canadian University in Dubai

PvZ: Yes, people want to use solar energy in the UAE and the rest of the region because they hear a lot about it and there is a lot of interest in the technology and they want to know how feasible it is for the market and what the best technology is for the region. However, there is still a lot of scepticism about the effectiveness and value that the technology will bring.

The people we flew in from Germany to conduct the workshop for Solar Days — TUV Rhineland — are running a test here, together with Masdar, where a number of photovoltaic products are being tested under the environmental conditions of this region.

Here it's still in a nascent stage; in other parts of the world, in Europe or the US, this technology has been tested extensively and they're already aware of what product is best suited to their varied environments. Here in the UAE, however, where we have a lot of dust, sand and humidity, we need to conduct a lot of testing to see which products will be most hard-wearing.

Q: If it is in the testing phase, does it mean that solar energy isn't being harnessed in the region?

PvZ: No. Testing doesn't mean people aren't able to use the technology. These technologies are already in use in some places in the UAE. Some street lights, for example, are solar powered; they use solar panels. Some of the new buildings are also harnessing solar power by using photovoltaic systems. The Lighthouse — in the Burj Dubai area — is going to implement photovoltaic cells. So the technology is coming in slowly, but no final consensus has been reached on which product is the best for this climate.

Q: What advances are yet to be made in the area of solar energy in order to make it a truly viable energy source that is utilised to its full potential?

PvZ: One important element that other parts of the world have and this part of the region has yet to offer is the concept of grid parity. This concept allows for the integration of electricity generated by solar cells back into the national grid. In Europe, you can actually have the government finance you for the electricity that you're providing. In rural areas, this system has caught on fast because it allows governments to provide electricity to areas that may not otherwise have them. Here, as an end consumer, you always have access to the grid >

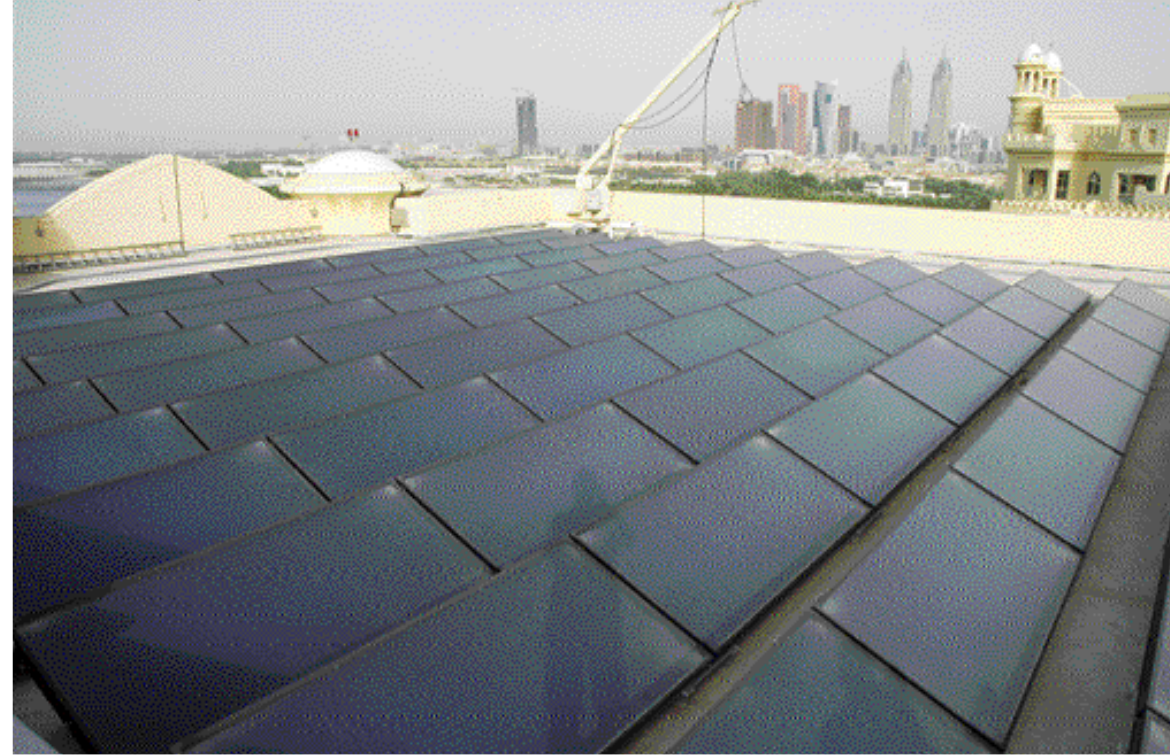


From left: Murat Aydemir, General Manager Middle East and Africa, Viessmann Middle East FZE; Ali Bin Towaih, Director of the Sustainable Energy and Environment Division (SEED) at TECOM Investments; and Reza Shaybani, Managing Director, Schuerten

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Philipp von Zitzewitz
Senior Consultant, Sesam

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and the cost of electricity is higher than that of implementing photovoltaic technology, so the incentive is always to return to the grid rather than explore new options for energy generation. It's really up to the government to step in now and incentivise this kind of shift.

Q: When you combine the subjects of all four conferences planned for 2009, you get four distinct aspects of waste management. What, in your opinion, is the status of waste management here in the UAE?

PvZ: Waste management is still very young here in the UAE. The country has the largest per capita CO2 footprint in the world and it is essential that this be reined in. But, in general, the focus now is on saving energy. We use too much energy via simple actions — the trend here has been to disregard the real cost of wasting energy. If we contextualise it,

80 per cent of all energy used goes into supporting air-conditioning units. This could easily be checked by constructing buildings in a better way, by defining the sufficient amount of cooling that is needed and also by insulating buildings properly.

This is the core point at which the market starts to think about green technology. The renewable energy resources need to be tested a bit more and the market is still a bit suspicious of this technology. Other elements, such as insulation, are more widely accepted and there is a lot of work being done in this area at the moment.

Q: How do you feel you could sustain and/or improve upon the programme you offer?

PvZ: We want to continue our association with the Association of Architects in the UAE (AA-UAE). They have recently launched the

CEPA (Continued Education Programme for Architects) system. If you look at the US or Britain, associations require professionals in the field to undergo mandatory continuing education programmes on an annual basis in order to keep their certification. The AA-UAE is looking to implement a similar system to ensure that registered professionals are up-to-date with the latest technologies in the field at all times. It will still be on a voluntary basis and not mandatory, as it is in the West, but our conferences have served their demand for sustainable training and they have offered their members the opportunity to participate in our seminars and get certification for doing so. The system needs to be better developed in the future, but we are working towards that.

'Solar Days' was the first time that they offered such training to their members and there

will be three more opportunities in the course of this year. The Architecture Association also cooperates with the Canadian University and set up education programmes for architecture professionals in the country; we step in with our conferences to provide this training. They set up the agenda and provide the certification and we deliver the actual training. We're continuing to work with these two parties for the upcoming conferences for the foreseeable future and I'm sure that with the passing of time and seminars, we will create a more sophisticated set-up for continuing professional accreditation. ☺

Water Days will take place from July 7-8, 2009, at The Canadian University in Dubai. For further information, contact Sesam Business Consultants on +971 4 335 9995

