

# Uniform standard will further push 'green' campaign

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Developing a uniform green building standard across the UAE would go a long way in promoting sustainability in the country, said senior industry analysts.

Speaking at a roundtable discussion on "How important is green building to the construction industry", the participants said sustainable construction is the only way to move forward and creating more awareness and developing a uniform standard would go a long way in further promoting green buildings in the UAE.

However most participants said the UAE continues to be the leader in building sustainable buildings in the region, and the investments towards green structures would increase in the days to come.

Commenting on sustainable initiatives being implemented in the UAE, Jeff Smit, Sustainability Engineer at Ramboll, said sustainable building development is regulated in the UAE, which forces developers to include these in their projects.

"In an emerging market such as the Middle East it is paramount to start with regulation, or at the least some sort of incentive to developers who choose to develop sustainable buildings," said Smit.

"We are noticing that there are other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who are interested in applying sustainable design principles and rating tools such as Leed without the need for regulation. However the number of projects pursuing sustainable design is less than in the UAE," he said.

Bernard Nasr, Executive Director of Tiger Profiles and Insulation, said most of the Middle Eastern countries are now voicing concerns and interests in the environment, and are doing their best to adopt green products and technologies. "This can be seen in particular in the UAE. The government's awareness of the importance of implementing sustainable initiatives is becoming gradually more and more evident through the measures being taken to develop and officially implement green building laws," said Nasr.

However, he said, the pace continues to remain slow. "We are anticipating that matters will be accelerated soon. It is a difficult task and requires education, investment, research and development, especially if we have to develop globally recognised green building laws".

Government involvement, according to Nasr, is crucial as it will be of greatest benefit to the companies who are already into the "sustainable" green product market to feel that their efforts are not on an individual basis but rather backed and supported by the government.

Jim Muldoon, Business Development Manager at Al Masood Bergum, was of the opinion that more awareness is required to accelerate the momentum gained in constructing green buildings in the UAE.

Commenting on the challenges faced by architects, contractors and developers in the region, Smit said traditionally developers associate sustainable design with far higher capital costs, and as most developers in the market have been speculative they are looking to maximise their profit by minimising construction costs with little thought of the effect on the building's lifecycle.

"Studies have shown that sustainable buildings generally cost no more than a typical building, however their operating costs can be significantly less than typical buildings in the region. Developers need to be better informed and be more open to sustainable design practices; it is more than just solar panels and wind turbines," he said. "I think it's the same for contractors – there is a genuine lack of knowledge about how to sort waste effectively, or where to send recycled materials, or how to mitigate the spread of dust on site sustainably."

According to Nasr, the challenge before the architects is allocating suitable resources for designing and building green buildings. "There are very few companies who have dedicated research and development to develop suitable green products and materials," he said.

"As for the contractors and developers, we are aware that most people have the impression that recycled or recyclable material is cheaper compared to other products. In reality, the greener the product the more expensive. It is based on the need for several factors that will ensure the product is not only 'green' but has also been manufactured in a 'green' manner that is not harmful to the environment," he added.

Nasr said with green building and construction laws coming under the spotlight, Middle East would soon be an active ground for a green construction boom.

"As members of the US Green Building Council [USGBC], we have been enthusiastically gauging the rising interest in green buildings and green construction among regional companies. The number of new members over the past year reflects the growing interest," he said.

"Green is here, and we believe here to stay. It is just a matter of time before which choosing green products will be a way of life and not a choice," he added.

About the impact of the recent global economic crisis and its impact on sustainable initiatives within the construction industry, Smit said: "I think everyone in the construction industry has been affected by the slowdown, however we have noticed that areas other than design are getting busier."

"As owners look to reduce operating costs, we are becoming more involved with optimising existing buildings through energy auditing and energy management studies. Improving existing building performance has a massive scope in the region, and we have noticed that without any capital expenditure many buildings can save 10-15 per cent of their energy just through operating more efficiently," he said.

Nasr said there are many existing buildings in Dubai that could reduce their energy usage.

"If the industry got behind an initiative such as this, it could have far reaching effects such as reducing the strain on the Dewa grid or reducing the need for additional desalination plants.

According to Nasr, the industry is facing a situation where it is the survival of the fittest. "The recession has brought with it additional opportunities to prove that the performance, quality and integrity is crucial."

Tiger Profiles and Insulation, he said, has been working on establishing a method of existence and development, and not just a short-term effort that goes out of the window at the first instant when there is a sign of an economic recession or slowdown.

Smit said that sustainable building is a part of everything Ramboll does in the region. "However, we are still educating architects, developers and other consultants on how to

conduct

sustainable

design.

"Many in the industry believe that sustainability ends with Leed or Estidama, however this should not be the case. Any project has opportunities for sustainable design additions, be it in the form of material selection, energy optimisation, or improved site practices. We include sustainable design on every project that we are involved in, from energy modeling to material suggestions," he said.

Sustainable design, he said, is paramount to future building design.

"Economically, operating costs are only going to increase in the future; developers need to be wary of this. Environmentally, buildings use about 40 per cent of all the energy consumed in the world. Sustainable design features that can be applied all buildings on a large scale will be very significant in reducing this," he added.

"Socially too people are becoming more and more aware of the impact of construction on the environment and they have an expectation on how 'green' a building is. Many large corporations will only occupy buildings that meet sustainable design criteria so developers who do not meet these requirements may struggle to fill their projects," added Smit.

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