

Muscat, with its low-rise cityscape, could prove to be an ideal city in the region for the introduction of 'green building initiatives' that could eventually turn it into an unparalleled eco-city in the Gulf. On the sidelines of the Muscat Green Days Conference, HUBERT VAZ confronts three key speakers with posers on 'sustainability' as a long-term goal and its application in the region

GREEN EVOL

THE Muscat Green Days Conference held on October 5-6 on the theme 'Education for a Sustainably Built Environment' brought together experts from the construction, energy, environment and research sectors in the region to discuss and present ways of saving energy.

The two-day conference, held under the patronage of Sayyed Salim Musallam Al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Administrative Development Affairs at the Ministry of Civil Services, and chaired by Dr Dieter Fuchs, General

Manager of Fraunhofer Middle East and President of the World Association of Applied Research, discussed a range of topics like intergrated water management strategies, green building rating systems, potential water saving devices, government initiatives on renewable energy, solar architecture, sustainable lighting solutions using LED technology, sustainable constructions, environmental impact assessment, etc.

In brief chats with some visiting speakers on the sidelines of the conference, H! sought to understand 'sustainability' as a new concept for Oman. Excerpts:

Don't wait for 'big brother'

Dr Dieter R. Fuchs

GM, Fraunhofer Middle East
Chairman of Muscat Green Days Conference

WHAT is your definition of a sustainably built environment?

SUSTAINABILITY is a buzzword, everybody uses it and it means more than just environment friendly. Sustainability for me, is something done in a way that it will serve us well even in the future. There are three legs to the concept of sustainability – it has to be economically viable, environmentally friendly as well as it must fulfill the demands of the people. Therefore, sustainability is often called the 'triple bottomline'. It has been under discussion for 30 years but in publicity since 20 years.

Is there any global programme that tackles sustainability in a concerted manner?

UNDER the United Nations umbrella, there are various initiatives but I would not call that a concerted action as the priorities in each country is dominated by many political, economic, sociological parameters. So, there is no concerted action on a global level. And, I doubt it makes sense. Globally, we have to create awareness but the strategies have to be implemented regionally and locally. No country must wait for international action or for strategies from the big brothers or the big countries like Brazil, China, India or the US. We have to create our own solutions.

How important was the Muscat Green Days Conference?

I PERSONALLY don't believe in only scientific conferences where scientists report to scientists, what is needed in the whole region is not only bringing together innovative people with new ideas but also the pragmatic people who know the latest state of the art without any risks to apply them. That's the beautiful thing about these events, which has finally reached Oman. Oman is the first country in the region that established the ministry of environmental affairs and always kept cultural heritage and environmental issues high up in its agenda.

Is it also one of the reasons why Muscat was chosen to host the event?

DEFINITELY. I think the plans of the organizers was to bring the event to Oman. But, I have the feeling that in Oman the pressure or the 'suffering' is less because in other countries more mistakes were taking place and so were served first. If you compare Oman with its neighbours, we'd say this country is in much better shape concerning environmental sound solutions. It took some time to prove that these events are successful and the authorities in Oman also showed keen interest in having the conference here.

How do you view the urban growth in Muscat?

IF YOU look in the skyline of Muscat, which is still a beautiful environment and which still uses indigenous traditional knowhow for building in such a climate. And, if you compare it with some parts of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, you see it by your first view that some of the developments do not fit to the climate, to the region and to the real demands of the people. Of course it is wonderful to have boomtowns and fast economic processes but, if you go too fast, you are doing mistakes, as well. So, a slower process in industrialisation as well as in the right solutions for diversification, for building and construction, for treating energy and water issues, etc. is here in Oman in a better situation, as compared to other parts of the region where so much damage has been done and it is difficult to correct now.

What would you say is the key disadvantage of living in high rise buildings which is not common in Muscat?

IN OTHER parts of the region, people get reluctant to move into buildings where their energy and water costs are exploding whereas staying in a sound environmentally friendly building would cost much less. In the discussion, there

