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As society grows increasingly aware of the concept of sustainability, we find out how it is applied in the building industry

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The open-plan layout in SP Setia's Corporate Headquarters has greatly improved communication among staff and departments

Sustainability is the buzzword for today's developments, many of which incorporate green features as part and parcel of their design rather than as a value-added feature.

This, however, wasn't always the case. In fact, Malaysia had a relatively late start when it came to the concept of sustainable developments. The realisation that buildings have a big impact on the environment first came in the 1990s in the United Kingdom, Europe and later on, the United States. These nations developed their own sustainability assessment systems, and other countries began adopting them for their own projects.

The domestic industry's initial attempts to adopt these ratings found them poorly suited to the local climate and building practices. Stepping in, the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) set up a committee for the purpose of tailoring a sustainability assessment method for local projects, which led to the launch of the Green Building Index (GBI) in 2009.

That same year, PAM and the Association of Consulting Engineers Malaysia (ACEM) also incorporated Greenbuildingindex Sdn Bhd as a wholly-owned subsidiary to facilitate GBI accreditation and training.

The evolution of green

Tan Siow Chung, the general manager of SP Setia Bhd's



FROM LEFT: Tan points out that the concept of green has evolved beyond just lush landscaping

Chan believes that public understanding of how a building's sustainability is assessed is lacking

township Bandar Setia Alam, highlights that a green development is not just about having vast amounts of greenery. "The concept of green has evolved from just having lush landscaping to bigger concepts such as sustainable designs and green architecture to air quality and construction waste management, and renewable energy," he says.

He provides examples of how eco-friendly practices can be adopted in other aspects of the construction process, including using recyclable construction materials and sourcing for materials that are manufactured near the site to reduce emissions that come from transportation. Tan also suggests implementing a construction waste management strategy that focuses on waste prevention, reduction, reuse and recycling.

Chan Seong Aun, who chairs the accreditation panel at Greenbuildingindex, points out that this is where public understanding on the assessment of a building's sustainability is lacking. "The GBI tools assess the building not only from its features, but also from its operation. That is why the certification is valid for only three years after completion. The certification has to be renewed by sending in actual performance data such as electricity and water bills for reassessment".

Other organisations have followed in the footsteps of PAM in developing their own sustainability rating systems, such as the Green Real Estate (GreenRE), pH JKR (PenaRafan Hijau Jabatan Kerja Raya) and Green Performance Assessment System (GreenPASS), though only the GBI is recognised by the World Green Building Council (WGBC).

Chan reveals that six criteria come into play when assessing a building's sustainability. Although all rating tools typically refer to these six as the basic assessment criteria, there are variations and sub-criteria in accordance with the local climate, building standards and practices as well as materials and resources in the countries in which they are implemented.

Sowing the seeds

It is no secret that the "greener" the workplace is, the better the employee's performance. Numerous research papers have illustrated the positive correlation between eco-friendly work environments and employee productivity.

Tan affirms this by noting that the open-plan office layout in the GBI Platinum-rated SP Setia Corporate Headquarters in Shah Alam, Selangor has greatly improved staff and interdepartmental communication. He stresses, though, that sustainability should be all-encompassing.

"Being green and sustainable to us is not just restricted to a building structure, but is a central tenet of our LiveLearn-WorkPlay development philosophy, where we encourage work-life balance with ample opportunities for health-related activities. When employees are healthy and happy at the workplace, productivity naturally improves," he explains.

He acknowledges that the incorporation of eco-friendly features more often than not leads to higher initial construction costs, with green buildings generally costing a premium of between 3% and 5%. However, benefits like reduced greenhouse gas emission, better indoor environment quality and savings from efficient energy and water usage far outweigh the drawbacks.

Joining the club

In terms of uptake, Chan notes that PAM, via Greenbuildingindex, has been playing an active role in encouraging more developers to jump on the sustainability bandwagon. One such example is its GBI Facilitator courses which offer training in the design and implementation of green building projects, and which target building professionals due to the pivotal role they play in incorporating eco-friendly features into projects during the initial design stage.

"We understand that many developers want recognition for their projects when they adopt sustainability features. The organisation has therefore worked with the Malaysia Green Building Confederation (MGBC) to give out biannual awards for the best green buildings which, in turn, are nominated for regional-level awards," he adds.

Aside from due recognition, many developers have also been vocal about financial incentives for incorporating green features. As such, Chan reveals that Greenbuildingindex is working with Malaysian Green Technology Corporation (GreenTech Malaysia) and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry to extend the tax incentives given to GBI-certified buildings until 2020. ■



Source: Greenbuildingindex Sdn Bhd

Buildings are assessed for their sustainability based on these six criteria