

insider



So many developers are claiming to be green when they aren't

BY STEVE PEARMAIN

Green hogwash

One has only to walk out of the front door here in Bangkok these days to be assailed with messages from developers proclaiming their green credentials. Residential, commercial and resort developers are falling over themselves in their rush to surf the green wave, but unfortunately for the environment, you usually only have to scratch the surface of their claims to find that nine times out of ten it is just 'greenwash' generated by a marketing department.

Planting a few trees and installing more energy efficient air conditioning units, whilst commendable, will not in itself 'save the planet' as is so often claimed on the advertising billboards. Whilst we should all applaud developers who seek to raise public awareness of environmental issues, it is also fairly evident that some unscrupulous operators are capitalising on the green theme merely as a PR exercise designed to boost sales and swell their coffers.

If property developers are serious about joining the battle against climate change and environmental degradation, then their efforts would be best spent exploring what tangible actions they can take to reduce the negative environmental impacts of their projects, rather than coming up with new marketing gimmicks. A useful first step would be a detailed examination of the potential environmental impacts that could arise as a direct consequence of each phase of a particular project's life-cycle; such as site selection, design, construction, maintenance and decommissioning. Each of these discrete phases has the potential to result in significant detrimental impacts on the local, regional and global environment, and consequently each should be subject to detailed scrutiny with regard to the key environmental sustainability indicators, which include:

- energy;
- transportation;
- waste management;
- natural resource consumption;
- emissions to environmental media; and land use and ecology.

In reality, many of these facets are inextricably linked and determining the green credentials of a particular project is a complex exercise. For example, the choice of a certain building material made during the design phase has the potential to diminish natural resources, pollute the environment, harm ecosystems and human health and contribute to global warming. When the concept of



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'embodied energy' is added to the equation the process becomes even more complex. Embodied energy is the energy used during the entire life cycle of a product, including the energy used for its manufacturing, transportation, and disposal. To put the importance of embodied energy into perspective in the context of Thailand's property development industry, it is worth noting that for every 1000kg of cement produced nearly 900kg of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂E) is emitted into the atmosphere. Furthermore concrete has a high thermal mass and acts as a sponge absorbing heat during the day, which it then releases at night causing the occupants of your typical condominium building to adjust their air conditioners downwards and send their energy bills and greenhouse gas emissions soaring upwards!

Clearly Southeast Asia's love affair with concrete has significant detrimental effects on the environment, and reducing the use of cement in construction projects would seem to be a vital pre-requisite in demonstrating a real commitment to the environment.

The building sector is responsible for the largest consumption of fossil fuels and natural resources in the world today, yet innovative, and often simple, modifications to construction and services design can lessen their impact on our environment through energy and resource efficiency. Simple passive solutions in tropical countries such as Thailand can include sun shading, building orientation and placement, less reliance on materials with a high thermal mass, rainwater harvesting and the use of natural ventilation systems (such as solar chimneys) and recycled and non toxic building and finishing materials. More active solu-

tions include the use of solar panels and wind turbines to generate renewable energy.

As more and more purportedly 'green' buildings fill the Southeast Asian skyline, how can we as potential purchasers be sure that a particular developer's claims are not just more greenwash? Surely it's time for Thailand to develop a formal third party 'green building' rating and certification process such as the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) promoted by the US Green Building Council, which has become the de facto sustainable property rating system internationally.

LEED certification provides independent, third-party verification by accredited professionals that a building project meets the highest green building and performance standards, is environmentally responsible and will provide a healthy place to live and work. LEED projects are currently in progress in 41 different countries, although to date only two projects have been certified in ASEAN countries; one in Thailand and one in Singapore.

A recent study by the CoStar Real Estate Information Group found that sustainable 'green' buildings outperform their non-green peers in key areas such as occupancy, sale price and rental rates. Some industry insiders have even gone so far as to suggest that if you're building today without LEED then you are building in obsolescence.

The magnitude of the challenge faced by humanity in the face of climate change and environmental degradation is truly daunting, and one that requires a serious and considered response by the property development industry.

Hawking greenwash in the face of such a global threat is entirely irresponsible as it trivialises the extent of the problem which in turn promotes complacency amongst the public. The irony is that constructing sustainable 'green' buildings not only benefits the environment but actually makes sound economic sense. Developers that actively reduce their environmental impact are more sustainable, profitable, valuable, competitive and socially responsible. This is good for the economy and the environment, often referred to as the win-win scenario.

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