Early Spring of Green Houses

Bogdan Mazur talks to Rafael Schurma, the President of Polish Green Building Council [PLGBC].

BM: The council over which you preside promotes ecological designing and building industry. What is so exceptional about a green building?

RS: A green building is designed, constructed and used according to the rules of sustainable development. Sustainable development as the one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In order to find out what a green building is, it is best to resort to all sorts of certifications which clearly state how green a given architectural structure is and what aspects of green engineering were included in its design, construction and utilization. Without specific data in a certificate we deal with the so-called greenwashing effect. Very often slogans advertising a “green housing estate”, an “ecological house” or “healthy office block” turn out to be unsubstantiated, calculated to maximize profits by skillful capitalist on modern trends.

BM: What architectural solutions are used in green buildings? Is it up to the architect?

RS: There is no particular system or several systems which work every time and automatically make a building ecological. As there are a great many green solutions, the choice is an individual matter. Of course, there are tested and reliable methods, but many factors have to be taken into consideration: the type of a building, local conditions, availability and price, the shape of a building and integration with other systems. Our council will try to explain in a comprehensive manner most of the aspects connected with this issue and demonstrate reliable systems and solutions on specific examples, as well as present the premises for making a particular decision.

The objects will probably be presented in the form of case studies and will.
Ecology means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

BM: What are the stages of obtaining a certification and how much time does it take?

RS: Let us take as an example a design pursuing the LEED certification. The main stages are: submitting an application, working on the project, the design review, answering the queries of GBCI, construction, the construction review, answering the queries of GBCI, obtaining the certificate. In addition, there is the possible appeal against the negative decision of GBCI, if the design does not score the expected number of points. All lasts minimally a year or a year and a half, with the cooperation of the investor, the design team, and the builder. The certification of larger designs lasts longer. The pursuit of a certification is a laborious process, which requires a lot of time from the investor and all the parties in question. On the other hand, such a certificate is a distinction on an international scale and most certainly it is worth the effort. In the USA people agree to work for a lower salary when the company premises are located in a building with an ecology certificate.

BM: Architects and developers may fear that building according to the rules of sustainable development will increase the costs of construction and utilization. To what extent are their concerns justified?

RS: Leith Sharp, the former director of Green Harvard Campus Initiative published data on the prices for a foot square of the respective buildings belonging to Harvard University. It is clearly visible that the level of certification or the lack of it for nearly constructed buildings has nothing to do with the price. I must add, to satisfy skeptics, that not everyone agrees with this opinion. Indubitably the costs depend on the type of a design and the assumed starting point data. However, the majority of experts in the field agree that the expenses never go beyond 5 or 10 per cent of the total price.

The mere exploitation of a well-designed building should bring substantial profits. The owners will decrease exploitation costs thanks to the low level of water and energy consumption. The companies whose premises are located in green buildings gain high efficiency of employees thanks to the high quality of IAQ, more daylight and the workers' satisfaction that they work in a company which cares for its employees. In the USA, people agree to work for a lower salary when the company premises are located in a building certified by LEED. Taking into account the total time of the utilization of a building, even the increase in the efficiency of employees by 0.5 per cent fully covers the construction costs. And we are talking of course of profits increased many times. Not to mention the possible damages and court suits for working in a badly designed building, where the workers suffer from Sick Building Syndrome or Building Related Illness. Developers can count on a faster sale or renting of certified premises and houses, and often at a higher price.

BM: Much has been said about the beneficial influence of green buildings on their users.

RS: That is true, researches show that people who work in green building less frequently take the doctor's leave and students less frequently miss classes. In buildings with more daylight students get better results at standardized tests and patients leave hospitals quicker. These are profits as well!

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BM: Have Polish architects and developers already noticed that it can be a profitable business?

RS: At present Polish developers struggle with so-called energy passports, which, although basic, are crucial for selling properties. Designers are also interested in obtaining certification, as they know that this will open the door to new clients.
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BM: Have Polish architects and developers already noticed that it can be a profitable business?

RS: At present Polish developers struggle with so called energy passports, which, although basic and obligatory, still cause problems. So far, the majority of contractors interested in building green houses in Poland are large Western companies. Aware of world trends, they rightly estimate the growing needs of our market. I hope that the situation will change and that we will not continue to ignore foreign trends. One of the major reasons for the dynamically growing interest was a perfectly carried out informative process, which showed that green building could be profitable. Around the world ecologists long ago ceased to be associated with a band of unhewn weirdos in a derelict boat, blocking successive uneccological undertakings. Even Greenpeace, the icon of such actions, changed its public image. Unfortunately, in our country this negative stereotype is still present. Trivially speaking, every second Pole in a word association game will connect the prefix “eco” with terrorism. PLGBC is planning to conduct a widespread informative campaign on ecology – at least within the building sector.

BM: What is the way to popularize the certification system in Poland?

RS: One of the statutory tasks of our council is to introduce in our country the accreditation system. At present the registration has to be done through the United States, Great Britain and soon probably through Germany. First, we have to decide if we want to introduce an already available system or create our own one.

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