Green building picking up speed in Poland

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After only a few years, sustainable building has taken root in Poland. But important challenges remain, such as raising above minimum green standards and adapting Poland’s existing office buildings.

Green building only started a few years ago, but since then interest has been growing constantly amid both international firms and Polish domestic players, according to Rafał Schurma, president and founder of the Polish Green Building Council (PPOB).

“Poland has achieved the first step in the sustainable building process: green certification is now part of regular building plans for offices in Poland, we gained public trust for such projects, and we observe a constant rise in requests for green office space,” said Mr Schurma.

According to Joanna Mróczek, head of research and consultancy at CB Richard Ellis in Warsaw, Poland is implementing green solutions much faster than the US or Western Europe did.

This should benefit Poland’s office stock in the long term. “A new generation of sustainable buildings are currently replacing the first wave of buildings erected around 2000, which are now getting a bit obsolete because they were built cheap and quick and simple,” said Ms Mróczek.

So far, five Polish buildings have received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, and 19 additional projects are currently registered in the system. Six buildings are also currently at different stages of BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) certification.

According to Rudolf Grossmayer, member of the board of Poleczki Business Park, many more buildings in the lower and middle asset classes have the potential to be certified, but just haven’t applied yet.

Going further

It therefore seems that developers, building managers and property agents understand the major benefits of going green. Lowering operational costs and improving profitability with reduced energy consumption and enhancing the value and marketability of assets is proving alluring.

But interest in sustainable building in Poland remains largely limited by price, with tenants rarely committed to paying more money for green solutions, said Mr Grossmayer.

Mr Schurma, however, remained confident that minimum levels of commitment will rise. “Not all innovative solutions make sense in our market,” he said. Major certification schemes like LEED and BREEAM are custom-made for the US and UK markets respectively, and one of the challenges of organizations like PPOB is to find how they can apply to other markets.

Existing buildings: the next challenge

While sustainability standards for new projects are now widely recognized in Poland, experts agree that adapting existing buildings involves considerably greater difficulty and higher costs.

Adjusting the concrete, low-quality buildings inherited from the post-war period is poised to be the industry's next big challenge. Both BREEAM and LEED have schemes for measuring improvements of the environmental performance of existing buildings, but no Polish edifice has applied for them yet. This might change soon, however. “We will have a few certifications for existing buildings very soon,” said Mr Schurma, declining to give further details.
Mr Grossmayer estimated that the shift should occur in the next five to 10 years.

Companies specializing in auditing energy use of existing buildings, common in Western Europe, are still absent from the Polish market. But this is also poised to change soon, with Ms Mroczek saying that some foreign companies are trying to enter the market—so far unsuccessfully.

Upgrading insulation to decrease the energy consumption of Poland’s communist-era buildings is the major issue right now, said Ms Mroczek, although she admitted that a lot depends on the management of each building and the ability to collect funds and invest in sustainable upgrades.

The first step towards upgrading Poland’s buildings might be to simply take stock of existing assets, as data on them is currently difficult to find.

“No one cares about ‘D’- and ‘E’-class buildings, because they are not modern, they are usually state-owned or occupied by local companies. We don’t know how much office space there is in these buildings: they are beyond any statistics,” said Ms Mroczek.

**Government push?**

Should the Polish government make a bigger effort to encourage making existing buildings sustainable? There is currently no minimum standard nor are there any incentives for sustainable commercial property in Poland.

Mr Grossmayer didn’t expect this to change soon. “The budgetary situation is difficult and I would expect the government to focus on subsidies for residential properties,” he said. “As for minimum standards, I think we have to be realistic. The government could set, for example, middle-class certification as a minimum, but higher than this would be counterproductive and unrealistic,” he added.

According to Mr Schurma, while the government’s role in setting minimum standards is highly important, “it is up to the industry to raise the bar first.”

**From Warsaw Business Journal by Alice Trudelle**

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