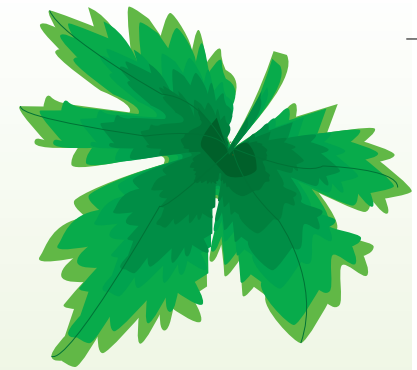


Green Building - The Perspective from Contractors on the Practical Difficulties and Limitations of Implementation



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Abstract

I am a contractor. That means I make a living by building roads and railways, offices, malls, homes, ports and harbours, tunnels, drainage systems, oil terminals, power stations that others have decided they want built either to use, to rent out or to sell. I am not involved in the decision to build or not to build. I am rarely given the opportunity to select the materials to be used in construction. To make a living, I must build what my customers have decided they want, in the most economical way. The opportunities I have to reduce the environmental impact of that work are, in the overall scheme of things, miniscule. So why am I here? Well maybe because I have no vested interest from a business perspective on the green credentials of the buildings I build, I hope my observations will be seen to be untainted by another agenda. I have no axe to grind, no position to defend ...

You may consider it odd for a civil engineering and building contractor to stand up and say that we can and should build far less than we do. We can make do with what we have. We can actually make do with less than we have, if we just make a few life-style changes as employers, as employees and as responsible citizens ...

It is a lost opportunity when the prime sites in our cities which have the best views are used for offices and shopping malls. Most office workers in HK do not have a window seat, and those that do rarely enjoy the view outside. Shopping malls do not generally want or need grand landscape vistas. It would have been so much better to have turned-over such sites to residential uses that could double as home-offices ...

The only environmentally sound reason for building a new building is that its net life-cycle carbon release, after considering the performance of the building it replaces, is negative. That is not something I, as a contractor, can have much influence over. Yes, maybe I can source the specified materials from local manufacturers, but I have no idea what the carbon value at the factory gate is, or where the raw materials were sourced, or the fuel used in the conversion processes. Without some form of comprehensive carbon-labeling system (and I mean comprehensive) which accurately and reliably informs the buyer of the total carbon emissions caused by each product, how can we judge what is a responsible product to buy? Presently, we do not have the tools to make informed decisions, nor even to make intelligent guesses ...

I note from a recent article I read in Newsweek that the highest rated LEED certified building in the US today wouldn't meet the minimum standards required in Germany. Also in the next 25 years 75% of all buildings in US will either be new (i.e. not yet built) or substantially renovated. Such scope for improvement ...

Yes I can build buildings that have windows that will convert sunlight into electricity, that collect and reuse rainwater, that are festooned with wind turbines and decorated with living plants, but it is not me who decides what to build. It sounds awful, but I am only following the orders of my customers. They are the drivers of change ...

Speaker

Mr. Russell Jones arrived in Hong Kong in 1995, and was both commercial manager and project manager for the building of the Mass Transit Railway's Kowloon Station. Since then, he has been responsible for Kumagai's performance on MTRC, KCRC and Government contracts in Hong Kong, including Yau Tong Station, Mei Foo Station Extension, Tsim Sha Tsui Extension, Kowloon Tong Station Extension, Discovery Bay Tunnel, Butterfly Valley Tunnel, Wan Chai to North Point Sewerage and Eagle's Nest Tunnel. He has also had responsibility for Kumagai's work in Australia, Vietnam and Taiwan.

Russell is passionate about environmental protection, and in addition to being the Chairman of the Environmental Committee of the Hong Kong Construction Association, is also serving on the Committee on Environment and Technology with the Construction Industry Council.