

Green buildings: is the market ready to pay more for them?

May 17 2016, by Koen Mortelmans

Certifications for sustainable construction materials and buildings are amply available. But to what extent is the market ready to invest in them?

The European construction industry and home-builder citizens are increasingly aware of sustainable choices. Some solutions can be more expensive than others, although sometimes this only concerns the construction phase.

It's not so much about whether people want to pay 'a' price supplement for sustainability, but rather about when the economy takes over from awareness again.

For several years, construction materials producers and building contractors have been extremely busy developing green products, systems and work methods. To evaluate those efforts in a neutral and objective way, several certification systems exist.

"On a world scale the North American system Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is currently more prevalent", says Andrew Ferdinando, architect at LKS Climate in Arrasate-Mondragon, Spain, but "Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Methodology (BREEAM, a system originally drawn up for the UK) is becoming the most EU-wide accepted certificate".

Ferdinando's company joined a European research project

(Breakthrough Solutions for Adaptable Envelopes in building Refurbishment - BRESAER) that is developing new technologies to reduce the primary [energy consumption](#) and greenhouse gas emissions of buildings. It also aims to improve indoor environment quality through thermal, acoustic, lighting and ventilation comfort.

He underlines the importance of incorporating such systems early in the design process: "Applying an environmental certification can increment costs. These costs depend greatly on when the certification is included in the design process".

Implementing certification at an early stage is key to reducing costs as it influences initial design solutions. The rating sought is also an issue: a Breeam Good is logically more economical than a Breeam Excellent. However, in recent surveys clients are placing more importance on factors such as the timing of incorporation and their past experience of certification processes."

Benny De Blaere, general director at the Belgian Construction Certification Association (BCCA) in Brussels, thinks certifications haven't increased the end users' price: "Instead, technical certification has thrown non-certified materials out of the market."

"In Belgium, technical quality certification has been started with voluntary efforts and agreements of the material producers. For them, developing their own quality control system would have been about as expensive as external certification", he adds.

Ton Jans, director at the Komo certification foundation in Gouda, the Netherlands, observes that an increasing number of architects, contractors and their clients include sustainability criteria in their work specifications.

"Institutional real estate developers especially, prefer certified buildings. Those buildings can reach higher prices when sold, because, whatever the initial construction costs, during their total life cycle their maintenance and energy consumption costs are lower."

"Public authorities and other institutional builders have taken the lead in opting for sustainable certification," confirms De Blaere. "Young private builders are following their example, until the extra costs for [certification](#) exceed their financial ceiling."

He has some thoughts about Breeam and Leed-like certifications: "For non-professionals, it is almost impossible to find out how much individual sustainable measures count in the total score of these holistic systems. Aspects such as the footprint of transport, the possibilities for recycling materials and the energy consumption cost during the life time of the buildings are all mixed together. For end users more specific certifications systems such as Natureplus can be more useful."

Another example he mentions is Cradle to Cradle. It contemplates five quality categories (material health, material reuse, renewable energy and carbon management, water stewardship, and social fairness), with a Basic, Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum level for each.

Provided by Youris.com

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