

# Greenwash is out, green walls are in

Integrating landscape architecture and banishing 'eco bling' were just two of the hot topics that **Ella Taylor** heard about at Ecobuild 2010.



Against a backdrop of 1,000 company exhibition stands and four full-height living walls enclosing a video installation, BBC journalist and host **Kirsty Wark** introduced the seminar *Second generation sustainability: zero carbon without the bling*. She suggested that second generation sustainability is about simplicity rather than complexity, and requires more than simply bolting things on to designs.

**Professor David Strong**, CEO of **Inbuilt**, said it's now an important time to think about whether we want to achieve more than just zero carbon, and the risks of diminishing returns, unintended consequences such as overheating and poor air quality, and "the law of bling", where technologies and gadgets are over-hyped.

Conversely, his favoured "eco minimalism" approach runs counter to the huge commercial interests that exist in selling products and systems, he said. Despite this challenge, he believes that second generation sustainable buildings should focus on elegant simplicity and designing out technical systems and associated costs.

Prof Strong argued that we can learn a lot from Passiv Haus standards, as these buildings benefit from ultra high thermal performance and low operational costs, with the only technology needed being mechanical ventilation with heat recovery. But he warned that a lot of people are jumping on the Passiv Haus bandwagon, and clarified that if a building is not certified, it's not Passiv Haus. In the UK,

less than 10 buildings are certified and work is ongoing on 90, while in Austria and Scandinavia there are thousands.

**Howard Liddell**, principle of **Gaia Architects** and principal adviser to the **Scottish Executive** on sustainability, declared that he is not a fan of Passiv Haus, due to problems with indoor air quality if users do not replace the filters on heat recovery systems. However he agreed with Prof Strong about the threat of "eco bling", declaring that it won't save energy and that the future rather lies in non-sexy solutions such as insulation.

Mr Liddell hit the nail on the head when he criticised what Ecobuild has become. He said that everybody there is green, as they all market themselves based on supposed eco credentials, but that maybe half a dozen or so of the companies on show are actually doing it properly. **Richard Simmons**, CEO of **CABE**, agreed, as did a lot of the audience, and added that Ecobuild isn't about place any more, it's about bits of kit.

In a similar vein, Mr Liddell lamented that to achieve *Code for Sustainable Homes* level 6, eco bling technologies need to be added to tick the boxes. Similarly, to achieve a BREEAM rating you must use what's in the guide, even if it's not the best solution. He said that in one of his projects, gas heating was more suitable – it would use 20% less carbon than a heat pump would in that specific building – but it was against BREEAM.

A delegate enquired about the conflict between natural and mechanical

ventilation, which Mr Liddell responded to by highlighting a concept called dynamic insulation, "a further development of building fabric in which heat usually lost through conduction is exchanged with air drawn into a building through the insulation," according to the Gaia website, which explains that a pressure difference either side of a membrane achieves this.

Questioned on the high costs of sustainable building, Prof Strong said that investment needs to go into the building fabric, not into technology and equipment. However he said that funding isn't the answer to sustainability, as the biggest challenge is behaviour change. At the moment, most people would spend the money saved on lower energy bills on a flight to Barcelona.

## Green is beautiful

To reach the 100+ seminars on offer at Ecobuild, visitors traversed two vast halls and even a second level at London's Earl's Court, so large was the exhibition. Marking the centre point was a cuboid made of four living walls, spectacularly planted by different specialists. Housing a cinema screen, a film by **Natural England's** Natural Development project played, creating a peaceful sanctuary which reflected its message of the importance of green infrastructure in development.

In the next hall, journalist and design consultant **Stephen Bailey** talked about *The unbearable redundancy of things*, questioning whether we need new things all the time.

However his points were undermined by an audience member who pointed out that he had been crumpling up the pages of his speech and throwing them on the floor after he read each one. This makes the paper harder to recycle, the delegate said, and questioned his attitude to responsibility.

Opening the next session *Green is beautiful: towards a new aesthetic*, **Sir Terry Farrell**, partner at **Farrell's**, said that creating sustainable strategies is more important than individual buildings, and that landscaping is very important. He said that for the Thames Gateway masterplan the landscaping is prioritised, as they hope to change the whole estuary into a national park of the future.

**CJ Lim**, founding director of **Studio 8 Architects** and professor of architecture and design at the Bartlett, UCL, spoke about urban farming, illustrating his points by throwing into the audience vegetables imported from as far away as Chile and Morocco, to emphasise the irresponsible nature of products with so many food miles. He estimated that utilising empty spaces in London for urban farming could feed about 10% of Londoners.

He pointed out that green is not just for architects, but for all of us. Housing and farming cohabit in a new city he has helped plan in South China, which will retain existing farmland and superimpose city infrastructure on top, sustaining people and keeping farmers in work.

**Pooran Desai**, founding director of **BioRegional Quintain**, said that sustainability now is about lifestyles, and that although buildings play an important part, it's about the whole deal.

**Will Alsop**, head of **RMJM's** London office, declared that he finds gizmos such as those on display at Ecobuild "horrible and uninteresting". He discussed green wash, saying that many architects sell themselves as green, but that he's designed buildings where the occupants claim it is the greenest building in Europe when he knows it's not.

Mr Alsop said that there is a notion that if something looks ugly then it must be good for you. But there are lots of things we can do with sustainable design, as people want excitement and their own space.

Asked whether policy should focus more on existing buildings, Sir Terry said yes, retrofitting and using what we've got is important. We could get a lot more houses into areas in London, as it is less dense than other cities like Paris, so we don't need new towns. Asked why he thought new towns are built on greenfield land, he replied that maybe it was because of NIMBYism, as sheep

are easier to offend than people.

When asked what the panel thought of the concept of developing brownfield before greenfield as a mandatory strategy, Sir Terry thought it should not be mandatory, but it should be done before moving and spreading out. Mr Desai had similar feelings, but Mr Alsop and Mr Lim both said they thought mandatory brownfield planning wouldn't be a bad idea. Mr Lim said that LA or Shanghai are compact cities, and that London has many voids to use in comparison.

### Left field

A less mainstream seminar on offer was *The age of ageing: how demographics will change the built environment*. In it **Dame Joan Bakewell**, Government-appointed voice for older people, said that the Equalities Bill means that public planning schemes must now account for the elderly.

She pointed out that there is no current policy of social housing for older people, prompting journalist and host **Jonathan Dibleby** to add: "let alone sustainable social housing for older people!"

In contrast, **Dan Cruickshank**, TV presenter, architectural historian and writer, looked at 17th and 18th century almshouses for inspiration. He said that high density living is good for older people and repeated a point raised by Dame Joan about how buildings should be able to accommodate inhabitants as they grow older.

**Sir Richard MacCormac**, chairman of **MJP Architects**, described the **Housing Our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation (HAPPI)** report which he contributed to, about Lifetime Homes, which can adapt to people ageing physically. He said that the amount of time elderly people spend at home makes the efficiency of their homes very important.

The most rousing seminar was the one entitled *Zero carbon new non-domestic buildings: rhetoric or reality?* **John Fiennes**, director for sustainable buildings and climate change at the **Department for Communities and Local Government**, said that it is not rhetoric, but not reality yet. The Government can help, he said, by defining a legal framework and showing leadership.

**Paul King**, CEO of the **UK Green Building Council**, said the Government had been shocked by the ambitious target that a UKGBC task group had recommended for zero carbon new non-domestic buildings, but set a target for 2019 when advised that this had industry backing.

He said that trials of new zero carbon buildings are needed before the regulations

come in, making this an opportunity for innovation.

**John Frankiewicz**, CEO of **Willmott Dixon**, said we need a new vision that revolves around whole life outcomes, not just intent. He believes EPCs should be mandatory, so that performance is linked to the value of buildings, and that incentives like this should be coupled with penalties.

**Dan Labbad**, CEO for Europe at **Lend Lease** and member of the UKGBC statutory board, said that at the moment there is a lot of rhetoric and that even the most informed in the industry are confused by the many various regulations. The challenge is how to make it simple and practical, and to find solutions to zero carbon by working collectively.

He said zero carbon new non-domestic buildings guidance needs to be market relevant and cost effective, and that mechanisms to value carbon, showing it as a business benefit, should be encouraged. The CRC is a starting point for this.

Delegates raised concerns about what they saw as a lack of capability in local authorities and building control, which the panel agreed needed to be addressed.

Another delegate asked if all the various regulations will be brought together to make things simpler. The industry delegates agreed that simplification is needed, with Mr King declaring that the industry would accept bolder targets in exchange for simplification. However Mr Fiennes said that bringing together lots of different aspects should be as simple as it can be but no simpler, as it is a complex subject.

How would a change of government affect progress towards zero carbon goals, someone else wanted to know. Mr King quoted that there is more to be lost politically by backtracking or stalling on these ambitions, and Mr Frankiewicz agreed that all the main parties are committed to the existing aims.

On the issue of existing non-domestic buildings and zero carbon, Mr Fiennes questioned whether regulations are needed, in terms of the market certainty that regulation provides. Mr King countered that we need a trajectory if we are to tackle carbon in existing buildings, and Mr Frankiewicz agreed it needs addressing. Mr Labbad pointed out that only 3.4% of buildings are new build or major refurbishments through planning, leaving the elephant in the room of the other 96.6%.

► <http://www.gaiagroup.org/include/pdf/publications/DI%20compressed.pdf>

► <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/naturaldevelopment>

► <http://www.ecobuild.co.uk>