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The Price of Building

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The Economics
of ESD:

Who will
build our
green
cities?

While the principles of environmentally sustainable design have largely gained acceptance in the architectural profession, the lack of a widespread uptake in the actual design of our built environment points to deeper problems with the discipline.

Utilitas, firmitas and venustas were the fundamentals of architecture according to Vitruvius, most often translated as commodity, firmness and delight. Sustainability has been sought in all three areas over its short contemporary life: firstly as an environmental imperative in a building's commodity (solar passive design comes to mind), then a second wave of regulations that controlled a building's firmness (BCA Section J for instance), and now there is a third wave that emphasises delight (where the well-insulated, high-thermal-mass room is sold on the basis of its comfort and quality rather than its physical properties or cost savings, as I have argued in AR109).

Increasingly, this more sophisticated form of ESD is being demanded in buildings, but how well prepared are architects to argue for these features in a design? Often their presentations rely on an update of Vitruvius: the triple bottom line of environmental, social and economic performance. While there is copious information (and consultant advice) on the first two, increasingly good environmental performance is being edited out, as architects are unable to maintain the crucial economic argument for their design ideas.

This frequent failure to meet the commercial aspects of a client's brief runs much deeper than the common rubric that architects are poor with money: both in their own business and their clients. The former is captured in the joke that goes along the lines of 'an architect wins the lottery and then keeps working until it's all gone'. The latter is seen more critically in the widespread belief that architects can't manage building budgets: hence the rise of 'project management' and 'value engineering' to control costs within the design/building process (see AR127).

The halcyon days where you could convince a client to go green, just because it was good, are long gone; and yet there is now a greater awareness, and demand, for green design from many clients. It's the cost-benefit analysis that's often missing to make it work. Environmentally aware architects, like green politicians, require sophisticated economic arguments – in which, sadly, both groups are poorly versed. The clients know the issues, but

are becoming wary of the 'green wash' and 'green bling'. They are becoming more hard headed on costs and are looking for a return on investment, even on civic and social projects.

The big change in recent ESD thinking is the realisation that there are far greater financial returns on 'big green ideas' involving typology and configuration, than the narrow issues of running costs and building maintenance that are so often spruiked by 'green' architects. For instance, ESD-based office buildings are more likely to be green-lighted (if you will) for the savings in human rather than physical resources: the more comfortable interiors bring greater productivity in the workplace, a lower churn in staff and a lowering of absenteeism: all of which often does far more for the bottom line than savings in energy and water (see AR114). The putative energy and water savings that could be captured in a suburb of green 'McMansions' are tiny compared to those obtained by building a completely different typology (of say Upside-Down, Inside-Out, Back-to-Front houses in AR112). And the rise of single-owner residential rental buildings, such as boarding houses, micro units and executive apartments, involves a paradigm shift for developers/owners who will hold the properties long term, as they will now be much more interested in the real running and maintenance costs, where previously they couldn't have cared less.

Hence the rise of the informed client. Not only the knowledgeable patrons of the 'Res Publica' (Leon Krier's term for the city's monuments) whom architects have long cultivated; but now the developers of the 'Res Privata', the apartments, offices and industrial buildings of the wider city. When architects talk of 'a good building needs a good client', do they include the commercially driven project managers for the big developers who commission the bulk of the city's buildings? With the Green Building Council, the Master Builders Association (MBA) and the Housing Industry Association (HIA) taking a strong interest in ESD, an increasing number of these corporate clients are keen on green. Even more importantly, where the developers/clients don't have a green agenda, are architects sophisticated enough to convert them to better design?

So we must ask: are architects sufficiently well versed in the commercial aspects of architecture to make the new green savings and can they effectively explain that vital third of the debate concerning economic sustainability? I fear not. I think many architects have no commercial understanding, seeing it as dirty work beneath their 'artist' status. Perhaps it was always so, but it need not be. J'accuse the critics and the schools.

Current architectural criticism seems to have moved from the architecture to the architect. Critics now concentrate on the attributes of the 'starchitect' to the exclusion of a rational analysis of the building. It seems to be a form of 'auteur theory', similar to the critiques of the film directors in the French New Wave: attributing all the creativity to the director (architect), to the exclusion of all the others involved (the client, site, consultants, builder, budget etc.). Buildings are styled for the hero shot, rather than their game-changing ideas. Form over content if you will, and green is now mostly about content, very little about form. It also involves a team, a big complex team, if you are to get it right.

The problem becomes even more pernicious in the architecture schools where there is a complete lack of understanding of 'the client'. Clients, so central in architectural practice, are almost entirely absent in architecture schools. Clients are almost never represented in the studio project as the starting point for a brief or, more importantly, as a vital part of the process (the companion problem to this being the artificial or non-real site). As a consequence, students get tutorial advice that is very confusing: sometimes tutors are mentors, sometimes they advise like clients, even if the tutors can't tell the difference and don't know they are doing so. It breeds an arrogance in recent graduates that means they cannot tell the difference between discussion, advice and instruction. No wonder they can't deliver the complexities of green beyond the learnt bling of a few PV panels, shading louvres and an exhaust stack. Add the idea of 'the form is all' to a lack of understanding of clients and you have a recipe for a lot of missed green opportunities. **ar**