

■ **Green buildings rapidly evolving as best design standard**

The Economic Times

November 27, 2009

PANELLING MADE from plastic waste, wood recycled from old ships, carpets of recycled plastic and CO2 monitors that regulate the proportion of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the room. These are just a handful of things you are likely to encounter if you walk into the ITC Green Centre in Gurgaon or the Patni Knowledge Centre in Noida, alongside more 'conventional' green measures like solar panels and fully day-lit office spaces. These two buildings , along with a few others across the country, have been among the early adopters of the green building movement in the country; a direct result of the increasing awareness on sustainability.

Quiz most people on why they are greening their buildings, and you can be guaranteed that the answer will touch upon them wanting to do their bit to save the earth and trying to cut down on emissions. So one tends to sit up and take notice when Anirudh Patni says, "We started going green because it makes imminent business sense. Using green intelligently can be beneficial to the bottomline." The senior vice-president for strategy and corporate development at Patni Computer Systems says the company's green spaces also make for healthier employees, directing impacting productivity.

A green building, by definition, is one which conserves natural resources, is energy efficient, and a healthier space for its occupants as compared to a conventional building. In India, the green building movement has been pioneered by CII which set up the Indian Green Building Council in 2001 at the behest of then US President Bill Clinton. "We decided that the headquarters of the CII-Green Building Centre in Hyderabad would be housed in a green building that would showcase all the different technologies which could be used in such a building," says Jamshyd Godrej, chairman, CIISohrabji Godrej Green Business Centre.

The result was the first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum certified building outside of the United States, and the third in the world. India has since rapidly moved up the ladder with the ITC and Patni structures ranking as two of the largest Platinum certified structures globally. At last count, India had a total of 52 certified green buildings and 428 green projects.

Niranjan Khatri, GM Welcomenviron Initiatives , ITC Welcomgroup, says work was already underway on their hotel division headquarters when CII suggested that ITC make it a green building. Construction was stopped in order to understand the finer nuances of a green building. "We realised that the green practices which we had implemented through our own learning were on par with LEEDS Gold standards, however , our chairman asked us to aim for a Platinum certification," he says.

While some tend to argue that the cost of setting up a green building tends to be higher than a conventional one, the converts point out the energy savings that kick in along with reduced operating costs mean that the difference in costs can be recovered within the first three years of the

building lifecycle. At the ITC Green Centre for instance, energy usage is pegged at 1,30,000 units instead of 6,30,000 units if this building was made with business as usual approach.

Besides, as they gain in popularity, the cost of constructing a green building too has come down significantly. Khatri points out that in 2003, there was a 15% cost overrun when building the Green Centre, which he calls a 'pioneers cost'. On the other hand, the Odyssey building at GE's John F Welch Technology Centre in Bangalore was completed earlier this year at a cost of Rs 138 crore — an incremental 0.5% of the total project cost went into making it a Gold certified structure.

CM Tiwari, environmental health and safety leader, GE JFWTC says that this cost would be offset easily, as they anticipate a reduction of 40% in operating costs, 25% in energy consumption and 20% in water consumption. Put differently, the savings are equivalent to powering close to 550 Indian homes or supplying water to about 250 people.

ITC is now in the process of extending its green initiatives to all upcoming, and existing hotel properties, with the latest one, ITC Royal Gardenia in Bangalore aiming to be carbon positive by next year.

While most large real estate developers too have climbed onto the green bandwagon proclaiming that their future projects will be green, there has been some amount of reluctance since the cost benefits that kick in would be beneficial to the end consumer and not the developer.

This is what Milestone Ecofirst Advisory Services is trying to solve. PG Ganapathy, Director at the 'sustainable development consultancy' says, "One problem with trying to build green buildings is that as soon as the architect reports a slight cost overrun, the owner is no longer keen to continue with it."

Which is why he is working with companies from the initial stages of the planning process so that green elements can be incorporated right at the design stage. One thing that often helps in keeping costs down, he says, is to look for regional solutions, rather than blindly adopting what Western countries are doing.

Critics may argue that opting for green buildings is often an attempt at 'greenwashing' and an easy way out for companies to be able to tick the relevant boxes without really doing much. Admitting that there are people who tend to label even regular measures green, Godrej points out that this partly is also due to lack of awareness.

"Green buildings are an easy and early win, and often as companies realise that sustainability goes beyond green spaces, they sign up to be a part of our 'Mission on Sustainable Growth'," he says. Till date, over 350 companies have voluntarily signed on, and CII is now working on norms for green SEZs and factories.

Meanwhile, globally as well as in India, it is clear that green is no longer a 'nice-to-have'. "For new buildings almost all over the world, 'green' with respect to energy usage is no longer really an issue it's now part of best practice in design. Only the very short sighted or very cash constrained now design and construct buildings without consideration of the life cycle costs of energy," says John Macomber, Harvard Business School lecturer on sustainability and real estate.

While green may cost marginally more than conventional spaces, it's almost certain that as it grows in popularity, going green will provide a very compelling cost equation that few smart businesses will be able to resist.



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