



The escalating cost of eco ignorance

While green rating tools are well-established for architects and builders looking to boost their environmental credentials, the Australian Green Infrastructure Council (AGIC) is working towards a breakthrough of its own. Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) Queensland regional director Michael Kerry has joined the board of AGIC.



Michael Kerry

What do you hope to achieve in your new role on the board of the Australian Green Infrastructure Council (AGIC)?

An important part of this role is to raise awareness and be an advocate for innovative approaches to planning, design and construction of infrastructure across all sectors, including transport, water, mining, power, as well as social and community infrastructure. To do this we will be refining and utilising the AGIC rating tool once it is developed.

How groundbreaking would this rating tool be?

My understanding is that it will be a world first because of its holistic nature, as it will cover economic, social and environmental sustainability.

There is a good deal of cynicism surrounding green star ratings and how valid they really are. What is your response to the assertion that these ratings are given too easily?

I am aware of the cynicism. The credibility of any rating system will ultimately rest with the way in which it is both conceived and administered. The Green Star rating system is a relatively new system, it has encouraged innovation in the property industry and it is now accepted as business as usual.

Our next challenge for buildings is to encourage the market to refurbish and re-use existing buildings, which make up almost 98 per cent of our building stock. Higher ratings for retrofitting existing building would help promote turning what's old into new again – and 'green.' The AGIC tool, with a well-designed and administered approach, will hopefully win community support and be a valuable guide to the relative performance of our infrastructure.

Can businesses afford not to be sustainable?

Put simply, no. We are rapidly entering an era, if we are not there already, when

any business which is not demonstrating environmentally sustainable practices and ethics will also not be a sustainable business financially. Earlier this year the Kearney Report showed companies focused on sustainability outperformed their peers during the financial crisis.

Can you name some direct examples of 'green' building success stories in Brisbane?

The most widely cited example in Brisbane is Green Square in Fortitude Valley, which houses part of the PB team. Several prominent local architects have also pioneered a sub-tropical design vernacular for residential buildings, maximising the benefits from correct orientation, shade, solar access for winter sun and flow-through ventilation as an alternative to air conditioning.

The Centre for Subtropical Design is doing some good work in promoting better design solutions and raising awareness about living in our subtropical climate.

We are on the cusp of a new generation of commercial buildings which will of necessity exhibit more sophisticated sustainability practices and improve people productivity and enhanced 'liveability'.

Infrastructure projects which are achieving improved sustainability outcomes include Brisbane's Northern Busway and Airport Link, which will reduce travel times and the economic dis-benefits of traffic congestion.

A major challenge for the future is to swing the balance significantly in favour of increased investment in smart and relevant public transport solutions, which goes back to land use and 'transit-oriented developments'.

Unfortunately we have not seen many good examples on the ground yet in Brisbane, but excellent opportunities exist in locations such as Bowen Hills and Fortitude Valley, or in Buranda and along the proposed Gold Coast light rail.

We must not overlook water, our most important natural resource for sustainable cities in the future. The South East Queensland Water Grid and water recycling plants such as the one at Bundamba are important pieces of regional infrastructure for the future.

The City Cats, increased use of bike paths and the cross river pedestrian/cycle bridges such as the Goodwill Bridge and Tank Street are excellent examples of good and 'green' infrastructure.

On the other hand, what are the worst examples of 'unsustainable' building and infrastructure here?

Many older buildings would be unsustainable by current standards because of poor energy ratings, inadequate disability access or poor communications. Similarly with infrastructure, an often cited example of 'unsustainable' infrastructure is the Captain Cook Expressway, which is probably most disliked for the physical separation it creates between the city centre and the river.

Although this is the road some people like to hate, it is a very important link in our traffic movement patterns – we would hopefully produce a better and more sustainable solution today, but nevertheless it has served the city well and is another example of its era.

What is the best way to grab people's attention to think about the relevance of climate change?

It is a combination of an ongoing push to increase awareness, plus carbon pricing, increased insurance premiums and various regulatory regimes will all play a part.

Our own experience of how climate change impacts on our day-to-day lives, such as through more regular and extreme weather events, will also grab attention and show this affects everybody.