

special
report

Home, Green Home

Everyone claims to want to live and work in a green space, but whether Hong Kong is moving in that direction is up for debate | Text : Elizabeth Kerr | Photo : Liquid Interiors / www.thinkstockphotos.com |





Do you reduce, reuse and recycle? Is your car fuel-efficient? Maybe you're on the waiting list for a Prius? Do you carry one of your local supermarket's "green" bags? If you're trying to do the responsible thing and live green, does it extend to your home? That's the million-dollar question right now. Initiatives and regulations are springing up all over the world aimed to curb our carbon footprints at all levels of daily life, but the question remains as to whether or not there are enough residences to make a difference. Since we covered the green boom in early 2009, there are still a limited number of developers with active green policies on the books in Hong Kong, and even fewer eco-friendly homes to choose from in the marketplace. Will that change anytime soon?

Rowena Gonzales is the founder of Hong Kong's Liquid Interiors and is also a LEED (the internationally recognised Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification programme) professional. LEED is one of only two green certifications available in Hong Kong, along with the voluntary HK BEAM

and HK BEAM Plus (Building Environmental Assessment Method). HK BEAM is applied to entire commercial buildings but has no certification system for interiors — which Gonzales believes will be instituted in early 2011. As it stands, government buildings need to be LEED or HK BEAM-approved, and though Swire, one of the city's biggest commercial developers, has a comprehensive green policy in place, there are no guidelines for private commercial or residential structures.

Among the major residential players, only Sun Hung Kai Properties has any kind of green policy guiding its construction and management. SHKP has an active environmental protection committee dedicated to environmental responsibility and the developer regularly includes energy-efficiency and other green measures from design all the way along the process to management. Those measures include planning so that buildings can maximise ventilation and sunlight, sourcing materials from sustainable forests and adopting non-invasive construction practices. For its efforts, SHKP subsidiary Kai

Shing Management Services was granted an Environmental Performance award in the Business Environment Council's Hong Kong Awards for Industries in January 2010. But is that enough?

Not quite, but it's a start. The Hong Kong Green Building Council was founded last year to administer HK BEAM, and that's a good sign. "When you look at the number of buildings certified by [LEED or HK BEAM] standards, it's not too high, though it's increasing. The trend in new buildings is sometimes to have two certificates," says Dr William Yu, head of WWF Hong Kong's climate programme. But, he continues, "there are 40,000 buildings in Hong Kong. It's a very small number."

But the desire to go green is strong, and it's an easy sell for designers working in commercial space, right? "Oh we're definitely still struggling. Everybody wants to go green ... but then you ask [clients] if they want a certification and usually they don't bother," Gonzales says, emphasising that green building and design remains a difficult sell



to builders, contractors and renovators. "There's no support from the government. For instance, in the United States, Canada, Australia, Singapore they have systems where you get tax benefits if you have certification for green building. So it's not seen as something they want to invest in."

Currently, offices, restaurants and hotels are the most likely owner/operators to follow a green plan, and best understand the holistic nature of eco-friendly design. In a city like Hong Kong where people prefer to see where their money is going, that's hard to explain. Green design includes water management, indoor air quality, careful resource and material usage, and exploiting natural light and ventilation — not necessarily things you can see or touch. Commercial buildings have more flexibility in adopting green features and practices because, "The additional cost in [residential buildings] in Hong Kong remains a concern for developers," Yu theorises. "If one developer tries to adopt 'green' and it leads to increased property prices it could be a disadvantage," vis-à-vis competitors. All new buildings are green in Australia and because they have a majority of developers on board, it encourages a green culture.

So what needs to happen in order for Hong Kong to pick up the pace on green homes? The first step is getting a handle on the city's diverging interests and the complex nature of the housing market in which incentives will vary from person to person. "You need to look at this issue from two different aspects. One is from the user perspective and another from the developer's. Are [users] ready to pay a premium for green buildings? Are they aware of all the advantages? I think a willingness to pay is a key. It's also a developer's concern due to additional building costs," Yu says. He goes on to suggest the government could come up with all the incentives it wants, but that traditional building practices have to change too. "When you touch on [high-rises] it goes to a very fundamental question in urban planning. Recently the planning department released an urban climatic map. That highlights the major air corridors in different areas ... The problem is the location," and whether any building will block wind passage for example. "Building high may not be the problem; building 'fat' is the problem."

Another issue lies in follow-through. Greening is even more difficult if a designer doesn't stay on top of their contractors. Crucial, says

Gonzales, is "Getting the contractors to build what you specify ... Contractors are in it to make money. They look at your materials and think 'What can I get in China that's cheaper?' Your contractors have to understand what the projects goals are." So getting that furniture with formaldehyde-free plywood can be hit and miss. Recently, Gonzales had contractors install LED lighting, use rapidly renewable materials like bamboo, recycled carpets and reused furniture in an office project. There was also planting to clean the air and act as a sound buffer, thorough waste management and a master smart switch that shuts down equipment at day's end was installed.

"I think people feel the difference when they go into a LEED-certified building," Gonzales argues, mentioning how our eyes can burn or that we notice a tickle in the throat after a day in the office. That's all reliant on indoor air quality. "A lot of it is common sense that doesn't happen all the time," she says. "For instance, maximising natural light. When people are in a lot of natural light they feel better." For anyone to feel good, though, it comes down to one thing for Yu: "I think [what's] important is how to motivate developers. Once a few start the remaining will follow." 