

Online encyclopedia for green buildings

It's called online social networking technology, and it's coming to a computer screen near you. The \$1.5 million Your Building website was launched last month to further advance a new generation of green and profitable commercial buildings, as Sean McGowan reports.

Designed to function as a wiki – a 'collaborative web tool' for those unfamiliar with the term – the Your Building website (www.yourbuilding.org) has been two years in the making, and is a joint initiative of the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO), the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Construction Innovation and the Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council (ASBEC).

This collaboration, which included consultation with industry bodies (of which AIRAH was one), has created an online community whose members can add their own content, post comments, listen to podcasts and contact each other through their personal profiles.

It reflects the functionality and growing popularity of other online forums such as Facebook and MySpace, using similar tools to enhance the knowledge of the industry about green building.

"The aim of Your Building is to change industry behaviours to achieve more sustainable outcomes. To do that, it must provide up to date and relevant information, encourage interaction and let people know that they can make a difference," explains project leader, Dr Tony Stapleton.

"In addition, for a website like Your Building to attract new and repeat visits it has to continually be refreshed with new information. This can be both expensive and limited in scope if we are to rely on commissioned content. (It is) far better to allow all those experts out there doing innovative and interesting things to share their experiences."

The website design was developed by a web team at the Queensland University of Technology after a wide ranging consultation process which began with a Construction Innovation online survey followed by a cross-industry and cross-geography workshop held in 2005 in Sydney.

Further workshops, interviews, telephone surveys and focus groups were held across the country to help scope and define both the content and web platform itself, which utilises some of the latest web technologies to enhance the experience and allows all users to make use of its content and functionality irrespective of their web experience.

"It is not just young people who use collaborative tools. Online web 2.0 tools are increasingly being used in companies to provide and share knowledge," says Dr Stapleton.

One of the site's main features is the use of internet links to pool thousands of individual sources of information on current sustainability practices, regulations, technological innovations and case studies into one single online location.

Dr Stapleton says there is a huge wealth of knowledge 'out there' on environmentally, socially and economically sustainable buildings, which until now has not been easily accessible.

"The job of Your Building is to make it easy, and profitable for the industry to build sustainably," he says, adding that the site would help tackle barriers to successful business cases by demonstrating how sustainable buildings can reduce liability and risk, increase tenant productivity and achieve a green premium.

"Creating sustainable commercial buildings which have positive social and environmental impacts can have enormous benefits for the owners, the occupiers, the employees and the business, as well as benefiting the city and the natural environment. Importantly, while they may require an initial investment above the cost of a normal building, they offer whole-of-life savings and benefits."

According to Your Building and the AGO, the building sector accounts for 10% of Australia's greenhouse emissions, 12% of the water used and up to 40% of total energy.

Activities around buildings also produce 40% of waste going to landfill and 40% of air emissions.

Chief executive officer of the CRC for Construction Innovation, Dr Keith Hampson, says sustainability has largely been thought to conflict with business priorities.

"A key priority now is to build the future capacity of the industry to tackle the environmental challenges Australia faces – to ensure we have a pool of talented, forward thinking young architects, designers and engineers who can take Australia's commercial property industry into the future."

"Your Building will prove a valuable tool in developing young talent." ■

Your Building workshops

Following the launch of the Your Building website, the CRC for Construction Innovation will be presenting a series of workshops over the coming year, facilitated by sustainability practitioners from RMIT Centre for Design.

The first in the series will be held later this month on the topic of Developing a Business Case for Sustainable Commercial Buildings, giving attendees the 'what', 'why' and 'how' and in turn developing attendees capacity to:

- identify business case drivers and value factors;
- justify the value of sustainability in commercial terms;
- create and present the business case for a project;
- influence and communicate with senior management, clients and key decision makers and;
- employ practical sustainability tools, models and concepts.

Other topics for 2008 will include Developing a Brief; Facility Management; Life Cycle Costing; and Valuing a Sustainable Building.

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