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Eco-bling gets the kiss off



THE CLICHÉD image of 'sustainable' housing is something slick, square, space age and festooned with so many wind turbines it looks ready for take-off.

But the growing opinion in the construction business is that we've all been a bit bedazzled by the shiny renewable energy gadgets and gizmos, or eco-bling as some of it is now being labelled. Architects and developers are increasingly looking for simpler solutions to eco-building and ones that don't have a payback longer than the life expectancy of the people living in them. Stewart Milne Timber Systems believes its got one, and it's made of wood (*p8*).

Its concept, Sigma II, may sound sci-fi, but Milne says it's governed by the KISS principle – 'keep it simple, stupid'.

It experimented with the ultra hi-tech eco-house approach in its original Sigma design at the BRE's Innovation Park in Watford. This looks the part: it's white and rectangular, four storeys high and topped out with the obligatory solar panels and turbine. But after exhaustive testing, which involved wiring up the house with monitors and having a real family live in it, the conclusion was that a new strategy was called for. It wasn't that the turbine blew off in a gale, or that the Barratt Green House next door blocked the sun from the solar panels. The fact was that the residents found much of the technology a bind and

the research showed that the key to eco building is primarily a thermally efficient 'envelope'.

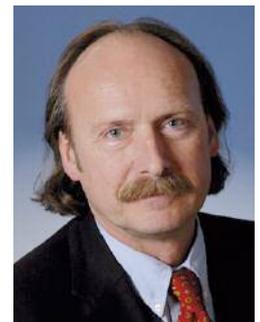
So in Sigma II out go the gizmos, in come super-insulated timber panels, with windows and seals pre-fitted in the factory to boost airtightness. Milne is now piloting the system with a housing association and believes in the not too distant future it could be putting houses on the ground that meet level 4 of the government's Code for Sustainable Homes – and not a wind turbine in sight.

Of course with UK construction going through its worst slump in decades all this might look a bit academic. But local and central government continue to ratchet up the pressure on construction to improve its environmental performance and, when recovery really sets in, the market is unlikely to be in the mood for eco-bling to provide the answers. It will want quick, affordable, straightforward sustainable solutions. As Milne is demonstrating, the timber and timber frame industries are in pole position to supply them.

Mike Jeffree
Editor

GUEST COLUMN

Ulrich van Roje is managing director of German sawmiller I van Roje & Sohn



A FEW WEEKS AGO the world of timber was a very different one. The general mood was dark and dismal due to the recession, with poor demand and surplus supplies. But today, supply and demand seem to be more in balance.

The sawmills of Europe have been forced to lower production dramatically. The result now is a situation in which demand is still low, but exceeds supply, thus causing prices to rise.

The question remains as to whether this is simply a flash in the pan or summer fireworks signalling a general change in the markets. Personally, I am warning everyone to be careful as I do not believe that the markets will start their true and slow recovery until 2010 or 2011, at the earliest. So we are facing a long and hard journey with high risks for all involved.

On the one hand, sawmills are in dire need of higher prices for sawn timber following the great losses of the past months. This may be the last thing our customers in the building and packaging industries can face, but they

will have to adjust to it. The reason is the collapse in the supply of sawn timber, which has led to a shortage

and long delivery times for various types of product. In addition, there has also been big demand from Japan, the Middle East and also the UK, much of which cannot be fulfilled.

Despite higher prices for sawn timber, supply will not rise because the sawmills cannot significantly increase their production. There is a raw material shortage in central Europe and Scandinavia making production more difficult and also causing prices of round timber to climb.

So, hard times! This is when partnerships are needed. Mutual trust will lead to our success.

(See our German special focus on pp24-28)

Ulrich van Roje