

Malaysia's Green Building Movement Is Like Deja vu All Over Again

By **Scott Kriner, Green Metal Consulting**



Last month I had the privilege and honor of speaking at the ArchiDEX conference and expo in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. That was the second time within a year that I had the pleasure of visiting this fascinating country in Southeast Asia, thanks to a business client. The ArchiDEX show attracts architects from all over Malaysia, Southeast Asia and even Europe, the Middle East and Africa. This year's show had over 900 exhibits and an estimated 20,000 attendees over four days.

The green building movement has caught fire in Malaysia. Just over two years ago, the Malaysia Green Building Confederation (MGBC) was established. Shortly thereafter, the MGBC launched their green building rating program called Green Building Index. Within the past few months, they also developed GreenPagesMalaysia, which is an information resource directory of green products and processes. To keep the momentum going, the MGBC organized a Green Building Forum presented in two tracks on the opening day of ArchiDEX. It was in this forum that I presented on the benefits and energy efficiency of cool metal roofing systems.

The interest in green buildings is not just due to the cry from treehuggers in that part of the world. Instead, Malaysia faces some circumstances that underscore the importance of changing the way in which buildings are constructed, refurbished and operated. The economy and the population in Malaysia are growing. Their national unemployment rate is a mere 3.3%. And along with growth comes more energy consumption. The Malaysian utility sector is concerned about the likelihood of rolling brownouts because of the growing demand for electricity. They believe they have enough capacity to get them through 2016 but not beyond. So there is already discussion about the possibility of having to build even more power plants. The government is looking for ways to soften this blow, and they are turning to the GBI as one way to lower the energy and water consumption of their building stock. This same scenario took place in California giving birth to energy efficient building standards, which we now refer to as Title 24 Part 6.

As impressive as the Green Building Forum was at ArchiDEX, what struck me most was what I saw at the expo. Seven halls of the enormous Kuala Lumpur Convention Center were devoted to product displays, while other halls featured the speakers and educational tracks. After walking the show with a colleague from my host client, I felt like Yogi Berra when he said, "It's just like déjà vu all over again". I was seeing history repeating itself but in a different part of the world.

Many of us in North America can remember when we didn't know what the acronym "USGBC" meant, and many referred to their program as LEEDS. Eighteen years after the formation of USGBC our building construction industry now knows all about the transformation that occurred with the USGBC's LEED programs.. We can also all remember how quickly everything it seemed was being labeled as green or eco-friendly early in the ramp up to green building practices. The start of greenwashing had taken place and we didn't even know it.

At ArchiDEX 2011, with the Green Building Index in its infancy, I was amazed at how quickly the majority of the exhibitors had jumped on the bandwagon to promote their products to architects with the terms "ECO", or "GREEN", or "CLEAN" added to the brand. It even went as far as an exhibitor promoting themselves as the "GREEN RESTROOM SOLUTION". When I inquired to some MGBC executives about how these "green" labels were being verified or policed, I was told that there is not yet any mechanism in place to do so. Sounds familiar doesn't it? Until the FTC upgraded their Green Guides last year, and independent laboratories emerged with verification/validation/certification programs, we too had no way to control greenwashing. That is changing in the US, and it will likely change in Malaysia and in other countries around the world.



The discussions that took place at the Green Building Forum and later among the speakers over dinner, also created flashbacks for me. The topic of whether government should mandate green construction was debated. (some jurisdictions already mandate rainwater harvesting). At the end of the discussion, the consensus among the speakers and audience was that incentives and peer pressure were the preferred way to grow the green market for now. However, they also rightfully noted that the government should lead by example and embrace green building practice within their own building stock. Sound familiar? The US Government was one of the first major building owners to embrace levels of LEED construction on many of their agencies and departments. In essence they took a voluntary program and mandated a given level of performance for government buildings.

The architects in Malaysia are now beginning to understand the GBI and are getting comfortable with the methodology of the program. One advantage that the MGBC has is that in the creation of their rating program they could compare and contrast a number of existing green building rating programs from all over the world. They reviewed Britain's BREEAM, the United States' LEED, China's THREE STAR, Singapore's GREEN MARK,, Australia's GREEN STAR, and Japan's CASBEE program. After selecting the best components of each program, they tailored their Green Building Index program to the climate, culture and construction style that are unique to Malaysia, rather than simply copying an existing rating programs.

So within two years, the MGBC has created and launched their rating program, introduced a directory of green products, engaged their government to support the program, introduced a Green Building theme to the ArchiDEX 2011 show and have started planning for a green building construction innovation forum later this year. Their work did not stop with the creation of GBI for new commercial buildings. They have also introduced a version of GBI for existing buildings, GBI for residential, GBI for factories and GBI for communities (referred to in Malaysia as "townships") At this pace, who knows how advanced their green programs will be after ten years in the marketplace. These are very impressive achievements in the limited time since MGBC was formed.

But a few observations from the expo again. This was the first Asian trade show that I attended, so I have no other reference point than what I see in the US. At ArchiDEX, all booths were elegantly designed and constructed to the highest quality, and well lit. I also noticed that many booths were decorated with elaborate floral arrangements delivered to from friends and customers congratulating them on their presence at the show. There were no cute giveaways like rubber stress balls, yardsticks, golf balls, green frogs, or stuffed penguins. Instead, at almost every booth there were lovely young ladies thrusting literature into attendees' chest as they walked past the booth. The irony is that with so many exhibitors pushing the green concept, there was no sign of cutting back on paper literature being distributed. The most popular give away items at the show were cloth shopping bags of all colors. Thousands of attendees left the show with dozens of colored bags draped across both arms as they left the convention center.

An interesting clash of East meets West was evident with the marketing concept that "sex sells". Many exhibitors at ArchiDEX used risqué photos or video depicting scantily clad women to get the attention of the male attendees. Likewise, the lovely young ladies handing out the literature are dressed like they are on their way to the local night club. And yet, an exhibitor from a Hot Tub company was displaying a middle-aged, over weight man in their display tub, wearing a one-piece old fashioned swimsuit and rubber cap. When asked why they didn't use a female model in a swimsuit instead, we were told that the show organizers prohibited it due to what is acceptable to Malaysian culture. I guess this illustrates that any country that is a melting pot of cultures, races, and religions will always be wrestling with political correctness.

The show covered many of the green metal related products and processes that we are all familiar with. Cool metal roofing, insulated metal panels, metal composite materials, above sheathing ventilation, building integrated photovoltaics, rooftop solar water heating systems, cool coatings, and rainwater harvesting systems were all featured.



It will be interesting to watch other countries and emerging economies as they embrace the green building rating concept like Malaysia has. The challenges related to energy, resources, water and indoor quality are universal to building construction markets everywhere. LEED was certainly not the first green building rating program and it will definitely not be the last. Let's hope that our green building programs in the US can learn from other similar programs just as well as others have learned the good and bad of our rating programs. As we watch all of this unfold, Yogi Berra will often come to mind when we experience green déjà vu all over again.

Scott Kriner is the president and founder of Green Metal Consulting Inc. He is a LEED Accredited Professional who began his career in the metal construction industry in 1981. His company is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council, the California Association of Building Energy Consultants and the Residential Energy Services Network (RESNET). Scott can be reached by email at skriner1@verizon.net or by phone at (610) 966-2430. You can also visit him on the web at www.greenmetalconsulting.com.