



EcoBuild in Focus: Interview with leading architect and specifier

AB- "Brian you are a senior architect and specifier who is very active in the field of green construction and education so presumably you are key target for EcoBuild exhibitors. How do you think that the architect and procurement community perceives the value of the EcoBuild Exhibition?"

BM – "Well EcoBuild started as a totally eco event which became more commercial. It is, in effect, Interbuild without the Tonka Toys. As it is now the only show in town companies just have to be there and some realise they need to present a sustainability story, others just turn up. Many companies simply seem to enhance their existing promotional materials with some eco spin. Many stories have no credible endorsements and do not stand up to scientific scrutiny. They are in reality green washing and the architect community has become skeptical of eco claims and EcoBuild as a result. This is unfair to those companies who are making real strides in the right direction. However you have to be pretty flexible in your definition of the term 'Eco' to find 10 new 'standout products' each year. I feel that the exhibition is overwhelmed by conventional building materials. The audience can usually find the pure eco product stands but might miss the more innovative technology stands. I expressed my concerns to the floor manager so I will be interested to see if and how things change.

AB - "What do you look for when specifying a flooring product and how much flexibility does a specifier actually have when price is normally a key issue?"

BM - Flooring is a finish and as such usually falls outside of 'competent construction' priorities. Flooring however has the potential to affect the performance of the external envelope and to modify the thermal mass and Indoor Air Quality. I look firstly for the necessary properties to achieve competent construction. I am at the same time concerned to create healthy buildings. I therefore check for any toxic content. I look for recycled content, take back and end of life schemes for recycling. I prefer the use of natural raw materials and innovative materials such as bio yarns and starch based adhesives. However I would also like to see EPD's so that we can compare all of the impacts of products whether natural or synthetic. We need to understand all of the impacts from cradle to grave and develop a common language in order to discuss them. I am keen to see more use of voluntary eco labels.

We are governed by cost planning and value engineering which are only posh words for cost cutting. So even if I specify a particular product there is something like a one in three chance that somebody in the chain will substitute it for a cheaper alternative.

AB- You mention that you try to ensure that there is evidence that products have no toxic content. How do you do this?

With difficulty. Manufacturers constantly invent new chemical concoctions to reduce costs and maintain performance. Safety Data Sheets are often vague or inaccurate with regard to chemical content. This now falls under REACH Regulations which should improve things greatly if they don't get watered down. This will take a few years to come fully into force. EPD's will help but they too are a little weak on toxicity. I learn most from my work with experts in the field of Life Cycle Assessment. I also look to REACH listings of Substances of Very High Concern and also to other lists such as the SIN list for chemicals that may be withdrawn in time. There are a fair few that appear in flooring and textile products.

AB -"What do you think are the key things for flooring companies to be focusing on to help architects differentiate green from not so green products?"

BM -Well I think that they should produce EPDs sooner rather than later. They should rein in the marketing people a little so that eco claims are more considered. I would encourage those with genuine green claims to adopt eco labels more. These are more common in Europe and are of considerable help in supporting a manufacturer's eco claims. Companies should actively adopt hazardous chemicals management policies so that they are ahead of REACH and pro actively substituting chemicals of concern. This is in their commercial interest as well as the end user's.

I predict that eventually low carbon material choices will become a priority and, as a result, renewable tree and plant based materials will become more popular.

AB -"How important is recycled content/recyclability in your Resource Efficiency considerations?"

BM- Manufacturers used to shy away from proclaiming recycled content for fear that products would be labeled 'inferior.' These days recycled content is seen as desirable. We do need to understand more about the environmental impacts of recycling and even substitution with natural materials before we may fully judge the benefits. Some recycling can be expensive and chemically and energy intensive and may generate toxic waste and emissions. For example recycled synthetic content, or even natural content, may require a synthetic binder such as formaldehyde to make it perform as is the case some chipboards and this can raise VOC and indoor air quality issues

Sustainable and efficient use of resources is a much more than recycling alone. Many designers are reliant upon 30 year old 'college knowledge' when resource efficiency was not even on the syllabus. We need to consider avoidance of waste through design and design for disassembly and recycling. Cradle to cradle design and the principles of green engineering provide excellent templates which are being picked up gradually by industry.

AB- As you say flooring installations create a variety of waste and I know that you are an advocate of Site Waste Management Planning (SWMP). How widely are these being used in construction generally and have there been improvements as a result?"

BM – Well the creation of 70 million tonnes/annum of construction waste seems relentless and such regulations as there are do not seem to be helping. There is little in the way of education on Site Waste Management Plans (SWMP) for architects through RIBA and no national Interior Design syllabus covering the topic. Until this situation improves the status quo is likely to continue. On the positive side the Code for Sustainable Homes is helping to drive SWMP but alas BREEAM tends to leave this to regulations to control which is simply not happening. The industry is made up of small businesses and the threshold for SWMP take up was set too high for most of them at £200k to £300k

The flooring industry has a big contribution to make in this area and I hope to be working with architects and flooring contractors to assist them in their efforts. For example I hope to develop a tool which I have named WasteCost®Floor that calculates predictable flooring waste and generates reports for designers. It is important that this becomes a design consideration as by the time the flooring contractor sees a specification there is little they can do to minimize waste. I will be speaking on this topic at EcoBuild at a seminar organized by Carpet Recycling UK on March 7th.

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