

INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The building sector plays a vital role in our economies. Accordingly, in India, it represents 12% of Gross Domestic Product and is growing at a rate of 9% a year. In particular, this growth is driven by expansion of the services sector and demand for additional office space. Existing business districts are in full expansion and newcomers are rising out of the ground. Consequently, at La Défense, the first part of the regeneration plan provides for the construction of 455 000 m² of new space. For its part, the city of Shenzhen, has grown from 30 000 inhabitants in 1980 to 8.61 million in 2007. Its port has become the 4th largest in the world in terms of traffic and its business district extends over 7.5 million m². In India, around 2 million square metres of new office space are required every year in the cities of New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore (and 5.5 million square metres as year in the country as a whole) to meet demand.

While this trend creates growth, wealth and employment, it is also a source for concern. In fact, the building sector is a very large consumer of energy and natural resources and a large emitter of greenhouse gases. At a time when there is widespread awareness of the risks of climate change and when, consequently, the need for sustainability is becoming increasingly meaningful, public authorities, experts and stakeholders (investors, constructors, companies, employees and users) feel the urgent need to remedy the situation.

This has resulted in the development, throughout the world, of assessment systems intended to measure building performance. The BREEAM (British Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) in the United Kingdom, the LEED in the United States and its Canadian version (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and the HQE (Haute Qualité Environnementale) standard in France, are just a few examples among others.

ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS: EXAMPLES OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND TARGETS TO HIT

Methods and procedures differ from one system to the next, but they all pursue similar targets, i.e. improve energy efficiency, management of incoming and outgoing flows, integration in the city, security, accessibility, construction aesthetics and comfort.

Nevertheless, two conditions appear necessary in order to achieve long-term acceptance in the building sector. Firstly, we have to ensure involvement and co-operation on the part of all stakeholders concerned. Secondly, and among other issues, we have to intervene at all levels: research and development, regulations, supervision and control, development and marketing of technologies, products and services.

Accordingly, in India, a building energy efficiency code, a label and a ratings system were adopted in 2007. The aim was to group all pre-existing texts in a single document and promote the fusion of traditional knowledge with modern technology, establish measurable targets for the consumption of resources such as water or energy, encourage the use of "green" materials and incite users to adopt reasonable patterns of behaviour.

In Canada, the Green Building Council plans to certify 100 000 buildings and 1 million homes between now and 2015, with the aim of cutting their water and energy consumption to half the 2005 level. It also aims at achieving energy neutral buildings and local authorities by 2030. Each stage of the building's life cycle is subject to certification: planning, site development, construction, occupation and operation, renovation, dismantling and deconstruction.

ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS: AN ATTEMPT AT INTERNATIONALISATION

The rise in the number of different assessment systems around the world is encouraging insofar as it translates a general awareness of the gravity of the issue and the need for urgent action. However, the sheer variety of the systems can lead to confusion and be complicated to manage. In fact, enterprises with operations in several, and often neighbouring, countries will be subject to different standards and regulations, albeit with similar objectives. Moreover, the message conveyed by a variety of divergent voices risks being difficult to interpret and will have less impact than one that is standardised or at least unified.

Being aware of the problem, the European Commission's Directorate General responsible for Science, Research and Development has launched a study to draft the text for a certification Label for Environmental, Social and Economic buildings (LenSE) sustainability. This is a project to draft an assessment procedure to measure the performance of existing buildings, renovation programmes and new construction, to develop an ISO certified European standard and to convince all the stakeholders to adhere to it.

Business districts realise that their managing authorities cannot remain absent from the debate on climate change or sustainable development in general. On the contrary, underpinned by their natural advantages, such as the presence on their respective territories of major contributors in economic terms, they can act as an example to others by supporting and promoting the implementation of existing assessment systems, encouraging the emergence of unified systems, at least by continent or by major geopolitical area, and encouraging research and experimentation.