

## **A personal review of the AECB 2007 Conference.**

Arriving at the Rivergreen Centre in Durham for the 2007 AECB annual conference was an interesting experience after passing through the South Yorkshire flood areas. Luckily the Centre is on the side of the hill above the river with no risk or problems. The building is an attractive modern statement with a green roof, rammed earth walls, timber cladding and a welcoming entrance foyer, which was filling rapidly when we arrived. Before we could even register, what in my view is the most important bit of the conference started, the networking with other delegates. For some it was their first conference, for others it was one of the highlights of every year's calendar, an essential part of the business and social year.

The welcome speech by Chris Herring spoke of a challenging year with the further development of the CarbonLite program, and the task of not only creating new buildings to be more energy efficient but also the much bigger challenge of bringing the existing building stock up to a much higher standard. He said the message was clear. We need to act now to effect change and influence others; to raise awareness and provide the skills to meet the challenge.

Before the lunch Peter Candler gave a presentation about, and an introduction to the building. He talked about his company's philosophy of developing commercial buildings that are different; buildings that have a much lower environmental impact both in their construction and use. He also mentioned that more efficient operational workspace was important. Later in the conference there were many guided tours of the building.

Paul King, the recently appointed CEO for the newly formed UK Green Building Council, gave us an incite into the difficulties he is experiencing establishing the basis for delivering the councils mission "*To dramatically improve the sustainability of the built environment by radically transforming the way it is planned, designed, constructed, maintained and operated*". I personally received the impression that the "roadmap" for this is not at all clear but will involve making many connections and associations, and trying to get everybody "to sing off the same hymn sheet" (my interpretation). Not an easy task, I am sure!

The workshops were to the usual high standard and as usual very informative and sometimes controversial. The different views and opinions are one of the things that, for me, make the conference so good; peer examination clarifies, re-enforces and distributes the ideas and opinions of everyone there. The range of workshops available over the two days covered alternative building materials, energy and energy efficiency, AECB standards, a builder's view of building to a standard, sustainable refurbishment, renovation and building regulations, a zero carbon brief and others.

Another recent initiative was the AECB's new Local Networks Group forming the connections to start local groups. Just what some of us need to give us

that extra bit of support and help us avoid the feeling that we are alone in trying to change the world!

The last session on Friday was a discussion, questions and answers session about the CarbonLite program; its scope and how it is being implemented.

The final presentation given by Chris Baines, the AECB president, was as usual, brilliant. With his usual thought provoking ideas, he talked about the growing and evolving AECB, the pressures that the future holds, and the opportunities that working with others might present. I was thinking, before he started talking, about the conference this year raising questions, not only about the buildings, their construction operation and use, but also about the wider community, supporting systems, sheltered housing, community structures, and primarily consulting residents throughout the process. These issues were brought up in two of the workshops I attended, 'Renovating Older Buildings', and 'Sustainable Refurbishment'. The refurbishment of buildings ensuring consultation with the community and the residents' theme was evident in the presentation given by Peter Candler, the Rivergreen Centre's developer, when he talked about designing workspace in consultation with tenants.

In conclusion the conference was, as usual, brilliant. I came away with three prominent thoughts. The first was the feeling that this conference said much more about community and community consultation in building than previous conferences. Secondly, that the rest of the world is at last realising there is a problem and we can try and do something about it. Thirdly, that when rainwater is collected off a green roof and used to flush the loos, as at the Rivergreen Centre, the water is coloured brown. As someone who has extensive experience with rainwater harvesting I, of course, knew this but was delighted to find that apart from a casual mention on the guided tour round the centre, the tenant feedback, including Durham County Council, didn't even consider it worth anything but a passing comment! So people can accept change if it's presented properly with explanation. There is hope for the future!

Roger Budgeon

The Greenshop Group and very long time member of the AECB.