

AECB Conference 2011

Chair's Introduction

Welcome to the AECB's annual conference for 2011. As chair of the Association I would like to wish you all a very warm welcome to what I hope will be a particularly exciting and challenging two days. This is our 18th annual conference, and by my reckoning I have been to 14 of those. But whether you have been to more, or whether this is your first I want to welcome you to what I am confident will be a highly rewarding event for all of us.

This year we are delighted that the conference is being hosted by the Department of Architecture and the Built Environment here at Nottingham University. The Department is a leading centre for teaching in architecture, urban design and sustainable energy technologies and is particularly noted for its innovative work in green issues and sustainability. So I am delighted that following this introduction, Professor Saffa Riffat, Chair in Sustainable Energy, will be offering his own welcome to you. We shall also of course have the opportunity of a guided tour to see for ourselves some of the innovative work undertaken here in Nottingham.

Last year's conference celebrated our 21st anniversary, so if you have any interest in these slightly arbitrary celebrations, then that should mean that we have now reached maturity. Strangely perhaps, that is the underlying theme for me this year for the AECB and at this conference. For me this is a twin theme. On one hand, the organization itself and its operations have reached maturity. On the other, we continue to 'punch above our weight' and are making a significant and very grown up contribution to UK policy.

In conversation a few days ago, Andy Simmonds said two things to me – well he said more, but these are the ones I want to mention. The first was that in his view the AECB is 'bucking the trend'. These are difficult times for charities and not-for-profit organizations. Significant numbers have disappeared in the last year alone. However, for the AECB, our membership levels are stable - well, in fact are growi - and financially we are also very stable. We have always worked on the principle that our core functioning should be self financing from membership fees. We should not be subject to the vagaries of funding rounds, grant bids and all of the financial rollercoaster to which so many not-for-profit organizations are subject. And we are not. Provided our membership – you – see value in what the AECB does, then we can retain our stability and independence and continue the important work that we all share.

The other relevant thing that Andy said to me is that there is 'rather a lot to do'. As a classic example of understatement, it takes some beating! I think we can assume that all of us here fully share this view. There is rather a lot to do. I have introduced every conference I have chaired in a similar vein, referring to the latest understanding of climate change science, peak oil and so on. I think we are now at a point when there is absolutely no need for me to do this. We all share the view that there is rather a lot to do, and all of us here are working in our own ways to address the most pressing environmental issues in the built environment. Its why we are here. And its why the AECB is here.

Our conference this year is, as ever, packed full of a wide range of workshops and events together as always with the opportunity for meeting and greeting, discussion and debate. Before we pitch into that, though, this morning we are going to hear more about the two key themes for the Association – what is happening within the AECB, and what the AECB is doing at a wider policy level.

So, we are going to hear more on how the AECB is now running, and the increasing level of service it is trying to offer you. I came into the organization of the AECB a shocking 16 years ago, as a Trustee, at a time when we regularly suffered volunteer burnout because so much was done on a voluntary or ‘shoe string’ basis. A lot of it still is and I am sure will continue to be, but for me the development over the last couple of years of a really effective executive team has been a huge and very exciting step forward. Some of this development has been courtesy of 3 years funding for membership development from the Esme Fairbairn Foundation. However we can now see a business plan whereby this will be sustainable after the end of the funding next year.

We are also seeing exciting new developments for all of us as members. The website is about to undergo a significant overhaul, and a number of new services, like the ‘soapbox’ are being introduced to give you more of a voice. Of course the Forum is still a fantastic vehicle for informed debate on all things relating to sustainability in the built environment, and I would strongly encourage you, if you don’t already use it, to do so, either to engage in debate, or simply for reference. The range of topics discussed and the authority and depth of discussion makes this a unique resource for all of us. We are also seeing a rapid expansion and development of our local group network – something that for me has always felt at the heart of the Association. We are after all primarily a networking organization, so this developing network is in many ways one of the most important things we do.

The regular cliché, that the AECB is ‘punching above its weight’ is I think becoming increasingly apposite in relation to our input to UK policy and to the wider industry. It is important to recognize that the AECB is an important resource for the UK construction industry and for this sector’s policy. Our membership – all of us – represent some of the most skilful exponents of sustainable or environmentally-responsible construction in the UK. Of course, we all recognize that ‘sustainability’ is now the buzz word. In fact if one judged solely from the amount of column inches, conferences and exhibitions devoted to sustainability in the construction sector, one could imagine that the problem was solved. But we know its not. We know that much of this can only be characterized by any thoughtful person as ‘greenwash’. For those of you who have not seen it, I would like to refer you to the Soapbox, where AECB Trustee Geoff Stow makes an impassioned plea for more impartial advice to be available to counter the greenwash, at all levels, from the consumer to the industry itself.

As I am sure you all know, the Passivhaus Trust launched just a year ago. In that time it has already established itself as an important voice in the UK construction industry. The Trust has the support of some key industry players as Founder Members, as well many others including some of you here as Standard Members. The Trust is of course an AECB initiative which grew out of the AECB Carbonlite programme. While operating independently with its own board of directors, it is never the less a subsidiary of the AECB, with the AECB’s democratic structure underpinning its operations. And I think it is something about which we should all be very proud. The UK needed a body like this to support and promote Passivhaus. The AECB delivered it. And after these introductions we will be hearing more from Jon Bootland, Chief Executive of the Trust.

Last year at the Centre for Alternative Technology we heard about the ‘Zero Carbon Britain 2030’ report. This year we are previewing the AECB’s own policy paper, ‘Less is More: Energy Security after Oil’. The paper is at consultation draft stage, and is going out to key policy makers and voices within the UK for comment. Apart from emphasizing the fundamental importance of energy efficiency, the report also challenges some key assumptions in other work such as the CAT report, or Professor David McKay’s recent work. We will be hearing more shortly from the authors, and there will be an in depth workshop this afternoon, but I would just like to summarise with some brief quotes from Professors Bob Lowe and Tadj Oreszczyn from the introduction.

“Less is More does not offer the prospect of an easy path to energy independence and decarbonisation. It makes it very clear that all options pose acute difficulties.....

Less is More offers an alternative to the emerging orthodoxy of large scale electrification of heat and road transport as a way to achieve or beat the UK’s 2050 CO2 emissions target....

Less-electric futures appear to have the capacity to deliver CO2 reductions both more cheaply and more quickly than more-electric.

Vigorous pursuit of energy efficiency, plus biosequestration, plus more focus on UK energy uses and the characteristics of energy systems, sets the stage for significantly cheaper and more secure energy supply options.”

Less is More is both important and controversial. Together with other work like the CAT report, it can begin to develop the debate about the way forward for the UK. Without input from established bodies like CAT and the AECB, which have been developing thinking in this field for a long time, the UK will rush into ‘solutions’ which simply take us in the wrong direction. As the authors say, it is important that we learn from international experience so that we don’t reinvent the wheel; however it is even more important that we don’t invent square wheels.

There is now so much that the AECB is doing that I can no longer encompass it within this introduction. We have the new AECB Carbonlite Passivhaus modular training courses leading to the CEPH exam, which you can learn more about later. We shall be hearing shortly from Andy Simmonds about our involvement with national database projects involving EST, BRE and the National Refurbishment Centre. We have the ongoing debate and fallout from the Biomass discussion paper, published at last years conference. And there’s more. The AECB is using its resources, which are first and foremost our skills and experience. There is rather a lot to be done, and the AECB and its members, with our unique experience must do all we can. I hope these 2 days will give us all a chance to reflect, to learn and then to get out there and get on with it. We are certainly needed.

At the very beginning of this conference I would also like to say a very big thank you to everyone who has put in so much hard work to make this event possible. A lot of paid and voluntary work, and a huge amount of commitment goes into organizing the AECB conference each year, and this one is no different. So for everyone who has been involved, can I say a very big thank you, and hope that its success will be the best possible ‘thank you’ for all your hard work.

And finally perhaps the biggest thank you of all. At core, as I have already said, the AECB is a membership organization. So, most of all, in these thanks, I would like to say thank all of you as members, for continuing the passion and enthusiasm on which this Association was founded.

Thankyou