

AECB Conference 2007 Opening address

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AECB Chair

Welcome to the AECB annual conference 2007.

Many of us find we are living with a strange paradox.

On the one hand we have the prospect of global warming which, according to the overwhelming scientific consensus, could bring human misery and environmental degradation on an unparalleled scale during this century.

On the other, we have the irony that for many of us this appalling situation is also resulting in exciting professional opportunities. Many AECB members have been attempting to address the challenges presented by this and other environmental issues within the construction sector for many years. Now we are finding that doors are opening, and even that there is a queue at our doors for the sort of information or skills in which, only very recently, it was difficult to elicit much interest.

It is exactly the same for the AECB. As an organisation we have an immense reserve of expertise, experience and commitment among our membership – exactly what is needed in the brave new world in which we find ourselves. The question is how do we best ensure that our voice continues to be clear, informed and informative among the inevitable deluge of greenwash and misconceived solutions?

I think it is fair to say that the AECB has in the last couple of years been focussing on solutions to low energy construction, to some degree to the exclusion of other issues. Now, with the financial support of the Esmee Fairburn Foundation and the Carbon Trust, we are at last able to take this work forward, both effectively and at a much bigger scale. During this conference you will hear more about the Carbonlite programme from its Director, and former Board member, Liz Reason.

However, new buildings are not the only issue. We have the existing housing stock, which presents in many ways a much greater challenge. So, this year, this conference is beginning to address this issue and hopefully we will see our members taking the issue forward and exploring radical solutions to a very difficult problem.

I am also aware that there has been some disquiet expressed recently about the considerable focus we have placed on energy in buildings, to the exclusion of wider environmental issues. It seems to me that in one sense this disquiet is well grounded. The AECB is not an organisation devoted purely to energy issues. There are other important issues which must be addressed.

Two experiences, in particular, in the last year have helped me personally to come to a clearer view on my own and the AECB's priorities.

The first experience was of listening to Regional Directors of Practical Action, which used to be known as the Intermediate Technology Development Group, discussing the impact that climate change is already having on some of the poorest people in the world, from three years of drought in the Masai Mara to increased flooding in Bangladesh. These are people on the ground dealing with the problems that climate change is already imposing on peoples who have the least ability to cope with additional burdens.

The second experience was attendance at the 11th International Passive House Conference in Austria in April. Of course there were lots of useful insights and information – perhaps the most striking being how far we have to go in the UK! But one key message I took away was that there are many ways of building a Passive House. Some are building 'high tech' using concrete, polystyrene, vacuum insulated panels. At the other end of the spectrum there are buildings constructed with 'natural materials' such as timber, straw, clay and so on. Perhaps the most striking example was the S-House near Vienna. This is a showcase building built almost entirely of 'natural' materials, with a heating load of less than half the Passive House requirement at 6 KWh/m²/a. We are showing a short film on the S-house, here later this afternoon.

The messages for me are clear. We need to act, and we need to act now. We are at a critical time: a unique and possibly final window of opportunity to mitigate the worst effects of global warming. We have to prioritise the development of the skills necessary throughout the construction industry to dramatically reduce carbon emissions through the construction of highly insulated, thermal bridge-free and airtight buildings. I would say this is a moral imperative and an absolute priority. But this does not preclude the development of the most sustainable ways of delivering these solutions. Tomorrow, Andy Simmonds, our Executive Officer, is available to explore with concerned members these (and any other) issues in more detail.

So, how do we best ensure that the AECB's independent and informed voice continues to be heard among the plethora of voices within the construction industry? What, in fact is the AECB's unique role at this time of enormous change? How do we relate to other organisations in the field?

Well, perhaps the most significant recent development has been the creation of the UK Green Building Council. At first glance, the brief for the Council sounds uncannily like the role the AECB has played for many years. However, looking more closely it is clear the Council will be a very different organisation from our own. I believe we must see it as a real opportunity, both for the development of increased sustainability within the construction industry, but also for the AECB to play a unique part in the development of the Council. Paul King, the recently appointed CEO of the UKGBC, will address us this afternoon on its role and his vision for the future of the Council. Tomorrow, our president, Chris Baines will introduce and lead a discussion on the Council and the AECB around the question 'should the AECB join the UKGBC?'

When considering our relationship with other organisations we also need to bear in mind the increasing importance of the EU as a driver of sustainable construction. Consequently, we have been trying to keep in touch with EU developments, and to involve the Association in Europe wide networking opportunities, particularly in relation to the development of the Passive House movement.

Again and again, when discussing the strengths of the AECB, we come back to our membership and the importance of networking. The AECB really is the membership. So how can we develop networking, and opportunities for learning together?

I would like to highlight two opportunities. The first is the online Forum. The quality of discussion, and variety of topics, is now quite awesome. If you have not tried it, it really is worth a look. The second is our local groups. Jo Saady and others have done sterling work in promoting and setting up local groups, partly I think out of frustration that this event – our annual conference – does only happen once a year. Later today, Jo is running a local groups session. So, if you are at all interested in setting up or participating in a local group, do drop in for a chat.

Of course, there's lots more going on today and tomorrow, but you already have the programme, so I don't need to tell you about this.

Just to mention a couple of things not in the programme. First, our webmaster, Tom Anderson is here today only. He will be manning a table this afternoon in the foyer, so if you would like to discuss the website, raise any problems you have had or even compliment him on it, now is your opportunity. Secondly, there is the possibility of using one of the breakout rooms today, between 5 and 6 for a 'fringe' meeting. If anyone wants to take up this offer, please see Geoff Stowe as soon as possible.

What I would like to remind you about is the AGM tomorrow afternoon, after the Conference itself has finished. It would be great if as many members as possible could stay for the AGM, as these are pivotal times for the Association, and your support and feedback are hugely valuable. As a slight enticement, I would also say that we shall be discussing the setting of new membership fees...something that affects all of us where it hurts: our pockets! You may want to have your say!

If there are issues you would like to raise during the Conference, apart from the various discussion opportunities already timetabled, you are welcome to buttonhole Board members who can be identified by their badges. All are passionate about the AECB and its future,

and I am sure would be delighted to discuss any issues in more detail.

Before I finish I would like to take a moment to celebrate a long time supporter of the AECB. Roy Hilton has been a member since the very early days of the early 90s. He was a familiar figure for many of us at Conference, attending regularly. I am not sure if he attended every conference held, but I am fairly sure he was at every conference I have attended. Roy had booked for this conference, but, I heard yesterday, sadly died two weeks ago. He will be missed by regular conference attenders.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have worked to make this Conference possible. Every year, the organisation falls largely to a small band of volunteers or even on one individual. This year I would particularly like to thank Geoff Stowe, who has put in a huge amount of work to make all of this happen.

Have a great conference!

Thankyou.