Occupiers as the Critical Stakeholders in a Sustainable Building

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ABSTRACT

There is an established body of knowledge about technical aspects of sustainable buildings however little research conducted into the post-occupancy relationship between sustainable buildings and occupiers based on the ‘form vs function’ argument (Reed & Bole 2009). There has been limited attention placed on the relationship between technological advances and how occupiers interact and behave with these buildings (Wener & Carmalt 2006). Therefore this is a preliminary study into differences (if any) between (a) the expectation of occupiers and (b) their actual experiences. The data was provided by a survey of occupiers/tenants of sustainable buildings in Melbourne, Australia in 2012. The findings demonstrated (a) occupants of sustainable buildings are primarily interested in their own personal comfort levels, (b) occupiers of 5 star sustainable buildings have the highest expectations of how their buildings operate however there also exists the largest gap between their expectations and actual experiences, and (c) the communication channels available to occupiers about the operation of their sustainable office building and how they address problems are very limited. There is an urgent need to ensure future efforts to incorporate sustainability into new and existing office buildings meet the needs of present and future occupiers without compromising short and long-term occupier satisfaction levels.

Keywords: Building Design, Obsolescence, Occupier, Perception, Sustainability, Sustainable Buildings

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has received substantial interest in society and this has also gradually transferred into the built environment discipline (Reed et al., 2010). The interest by stakeholders in sustainability is a result of concern about climate change and global warming in the broader media. This trend was initially observed at built environment and property conferences, followed by an increased research in this emerging area. However the concept of sustainability has evolved over time and today means different things to different people (Lockwood et al., 2008). For example there are many types of sustainability and 50 different ‘shades of green’ which depends somewhat on the view of each stakeholder. Most organisations would argue
they have incorporated some form of sustain-
ability in their building design, construction or at least management (Edwards et al., 2006).
Due to other pressures (e.g. the need to embrace corporate social responsibility) many individual and collective groups and organisations have gained an interest, without a deeper conceptual understanding, in sustainability due to its higher profile and the general interest factor. Whilst there is an established body of knowledge about the technical aspects of sustainable buildings, there has been little research conducted into the relationship between the architects (i.e. form) and occupiers (i.e. function) (Reed & Bole 2009). Since the social aspect is a major principle of sustainability (Hoffman et al., 2008) it is important to understand the occupiers’ perceptions and their expectations of sustainable building design and advanced technology now incorporated in buildings (Brown et al., 2009).

The initial attention regarding incorporating sustainability in the built environment was placed on the design and construction phases of new buildings, predominantly office buildings (Reed et al., 2012). Eventually this moved onto existing buildings when it was realised the implementation phase would take too long after considering the relatively long lifecycle of a building and the need for immediate action. Other areas of research into sustainability have been extended to include other land uses (e.g. retail, residential) as well as acknowledging the benefits of corporate social responsibility (Maver et al., 2003). In some countries monetary incentive schemes have also been introduced with limited success in order to expedite the uptake of sustainable attributes in a building.

New sustainable office buildings incorporate modern and sophisticated designs and use advanced up-to-date technology for operational practices that substantially reduces or eliminates its negative impact on the environment and its occupants (Kohler 1999). However there is usually limited discussion about human behavioural and social responses to the issue of sustainability in buildings (Roulet et al., 2006), especially regarding the relationship between technological advances in sustainable buildings and how occupants interact and behave with these buildings (Wener & Carmalt, 2006). Accordingly this paper examines the contribution of the built environment towards sustainability by identifying and examining an essential yet often overlooked stakeholder in the built environment – the occupier/tenant. To-date most of the attention has been placed on high profile aspects including the architecture/design, location and construction materials. Only recently there have been sufficient sustainable buildings to permit this type of preliminary investigation. The results will assist other stakeholders in the relatively short design and construction phases to ensure the occupiers continue to demand space in the building in the extremely long tenant phase.

THE CHANGING PERCEPTION OF THE OCCUPIER IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Property professionals have been discussing how to incorporate sustainability into property markets and the relationship with the building design, construction and in-use phases which is also further complicated due to varying land uses and locations. It is anticipated there is an inverse relationship in a generalised manner between the capabilities of the built environment and the perceptions of occupiers over time as shown in Figure 1. Over a specified time period (i.e. depending on attributes such as the type of building, other competing buildings, state of the market) it is argued the utility of a building decreases (a) as a result of obsolescence which in turn causes depreciation. An example is a building which is unable to incorporate computer cabling due to the original design and construction phases. However at the same time the expectations of occupiers have been increasing (b) where an occupier now has higher expectations than before of buildings. For example occupiers expect the elevator waiting time period to be extremely short as every additional second to wait is a negative factor. When the additional dimension of sus-
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