

# The compulsory passive

**The last of the three BuildGreen conferences of 2012 looked at the important question of how the Brussels legislation making the passive standard compulsory from 2015 would impact the market in concrete terms. Nathalie Saverys and Kathleen Iweins once again managed to attract top quality, relevant speakers to address the delegates.**

**N**athalie Saverys herself set the scene, pointing out that from 2015 Brussels would become the first region in Europe to make the passive standard compulsory for all new buildings and total renovations. She said that there had already been a decrease of 18% in energy use between 2004 and 2010, despite a substantial increase in population. This is why Brussels is one of the top three green cities in Europe.

Speaking for the Brussels Environment Agency (IBGE) Grégoire Clerfayt, who has led most of the discussions between the region and the industry reminded the audience that buildings, not transport as popularly believed, are the highest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub>. And at European level, the EU wants to achieve energy independence and further develop renewable energies. Stating that Brussels is looking for long term results from buildings, people and transport, Grégoire Clerfayt also said that sustainability involved looking at the whole life-cycle of the building, not just its energy use during the operational phase. The passive norm requires a number of techniques, including thick insulation, a high degree of air tightness, controlled ventilation, limited energy used for heating and cooling. He believed there are no particular constraints on the architecture, although price considerations for the technical equipment could be an issue. Grégoire Clerfayt also praised the progress made in Brussels, pointing out that there are 180 exemplary buildings and four passive tower projects in the pipeline. Amongst those who had opted for the passive standard, he was able to produce a long list of both private and public companies and other bodies. And it isn't only offices and housing: schools and even a mosque are included in the building types so far labelled 'exemplary'. To add a touch of realism to the 2015 date, Grégoire Clerfayt finished by saying that this would mean the first buildings to obtain permits under the new legislation would be delivered in 2017 or 2018.

## **The financial question**

From the point of view of a major agent and consultant, Pierre-Paul Verelst of Jones Lang LaSalle looked at the difficulty of having so many different 'green' labels in so many different countries. This simply leads to complexity and opacity, he said. A

summary of what some of the major developers and investors in Belgium are doing when it comes to green certification, showed some divergence. However, if a consensus could be found among many of them (he cited such names as Cofinimmo, Befimmo, AG, Immobel, Atenor and others) it would be that the general (though not universal) trend is to aim for BREEAM 'Very Good' or 'Excellent' certification in new constructions and total renovations. Pierre-Paul Verelst did point out another possible element of confusion, however, saying that neither of these labels equated to 'passive'. In Belgium, the relatively new Valideo certification, he explained, has the advantage not enjoyed by all labels, of being BREEAM compatible. While only around 3% of the existing office stock of a little over 13 million square metres in Brussels has a label, he showed that more than half of the new deliveries expected in 2013 will have one. Amongst flagship 'green' buildings he mentioned Black Pearl, Up-site and Louise 120 (a passive renovation).

From the position of dealing with owners, investors and tenants, Jones Lang LaSalle has identified that all believe that opting for green buildings is good for their image, but tenants also expect to make long term energy savings while investors are not so sure whether the level of savings justifies the extra cost. On the same subject, the question has to be asked as to whether, if the financial returns cannot be proved, banks will finance the construction of such buildings...

## **The technical issues**

Stéphan Sonnevile, CEO of Atenor group, admitted that he had at first been sceptical about the whole topic, but had changed his mind after discussions with others, including the authorities which he praised for having pushed the agenda. His company, he said, had seen how this situation was developing and had taken the time to modify the way it worked in all departments, in order to be ready. This included construction, marketing and others. Stéphan Sonnevile said that from a developer's perspective, areas which required attention in the design and construction phases in order to be passive were façades, lighting, air tightness. He also emphasised the role of geo-thermal techniques, and used Atenor projects to illustrate this. The 'Trebelle' project (Brussels European district), for example,

# standard – what will it mean?



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Brussels Environment Agency (IBGE)  
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Stéphan Sonnevile  
CEO, Atenor Group  
“At some point in the future non-passive buildings will not be in favour.”



Antoine Crahay,  
representing Minister Evelyne Huytebroek,  
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benefits from a large ground area, making a geo-thermal treatment perfectly possible. Along with complex work on the elaborate façade, this would mean that Trebel would be passive.

The ‘Victor’ project at Brussels South Station is also set to be passive, although using geo-thermal techniques is difficult because of the metro etc... He pointed out that Atenor had originally aimed for a BREEAM certification for Victor, but that the investment made had led to it becoming passive. Brussels Europa cannot make use of geo-thermals, so techniques such as photo-voltaic panels, night chilling etc. would be used. This will be a challenge for Atenor, but they hope to succeed. City Docks, he assured the delegates, will be passive whatever the evolution of the PRAS (ground use legislation) imposes.

On the question of whether there are already too many offices in Brussels: “There aren’t too many offices, there are too many old and obsolete offices”. Finally, Stéphan Sonnevile, who had also called for quicker permit time-scales, pointed out the developer’s role, which he described as a link in the chain, a link enabling the politicians’ policies to be put into practice. Speaking of the on-cost of all this (Trebel will require an extra € 50-100 per square metre for example), Stéphan Sonnevile simply said “The price is the price”, and that at some point in the future non-passive buildings would not be in favour...

## Answering the doubts

Antoine Crahay was representing Brussels Environment Minister Evelyne Huytebroek, whose department is responsible for imposing the passive standard. The ministry itself is having a passive building constructed on the site of Tour & Taxis just

outside Brussels city centre, a 16,000 m<sup>2</sup> building set to be the largest passive building in Europe. So he tackled the question of how the occupants – in the case of the ministry there are going to be 600 people moving in – perceived the switch to passive, and what their concerns are. He had had to answer the questions (also alluded to by other speakers) of whether being in a passive building meant it was too hot in summer and too cold in winter... Can the personnel control their working environments, can they open the windows. Antoine Crahay showed a series of short film clips showing people who lived or worked in passive buildings around Europe. Amongst amusing sequences was one man who opened the window of his passive building and then sat down and said “let’s wait and see if anything happens...” – which of course, it didn’t. The outcome of all these clips was that living or working in a passive building is very much like living or working in a traditional building, nothing out of the ordinary, and even the maintenance costs are about the same.

Moving on to the subject of Brussels’ policy in this domain, Antoine Crahay said that the desire was to make Brussels a sustainable city, and the compulsory passive standard is one brick to make this happen. He also made reference to the ‘district contracts’ all over the city, which involve changes in behaviour. The ministry is moving into a passive building both to be exemplary, and to show that even in the city itself, this is possible and desirable. He pointed out some of the technical features of the building, such as the atrium being used to ventilate and remove heat, and the fact that there are no false ceilings or floors, which would mean a slightly different way of working in terms of equipment.

Tim HARRUP ■