

GOOD DEEDS

Corporate social responsibility is much more than just philanthropy, volunteerism and eco-friendliness. It is the business philosophy of making a profit in a responsible manner. **BY MINDY TAN**

MOST small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) adopt some form of sustainable practices. But ask them to incorporate it in a formalised and structured manner, and most balk. “Often, small and medium-sized companies say they have no time for corporate social responsibility (CSR), but in fact, without realising it, many are already practising some form of CSR. This is especially so for family-run SMEs, where the relationships they maintain with clients, employees, business partners and the local community have been built on trust and a responsible approach to business,” says Christopher Ang, executive director of Singapore Compact for Corporate Social Responsibility.

“Philanthropy has long been a staple of CSR in corporate Singapore for many years. In the past decade or so however, there is a growing awareness of the need for companies to ‘do good’, which has led to an increase in volunteerism and eco-movements by businesses large and small.”

But while this is a good and commendable trend, CSR is much more than just philanthropy, volunteerism and eco-friendliness, adds Mr Ang. It is the business philosophy of making a profit in a responsible manner.

“I doubt that most SMEs currently appreciate how sustainability would help their business,” says Chanika Charoenwong, a lecturer at Nanyang Business School, at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

“SMEs and their stakeholders need to be convinced that sustainability itself can be a strategy to grow the business and help them compete in the market. More publicity of SMEs that have successfully implemented sustainability practices would be a good motivation for other SMEs to embrace sustainability.”

A good example, says Dr Charoenwong, is Greenpac, a holistic solutions provider of environmentally friendly packaging, that has saved on utility costs through recycling and reducing water usage and using electricity generated from solar panels.

ADDP Architects is another SME that has adopted and indeed gone on to be a green champion. But Tang Kok Thye, associate partner at ADDP Architects is quick to say that his firm does not aim to educate. Instead, it tries to share its knowledge. What about? The importance of greening buildings for one, and perhaps more importantly, how it can be done within a limited budget.

After all, to put it bluntly, talk about sustainability often boils down to one question: How much?

THE GREEN MODEL

Five years ago, ADDP designed the first Green Mark Platinum executive condominium (EC), Belysa. A Greenmark Platinum rating is the highest rating that a building can receive. The Building and Construction Authority’s (BCA) Green Mark is a green building rating system to evaluate a building for its environmental impact and performance.

“We worked very hard with the developers to show them how it can be done at cost. Luckily, (the developers) were quite receptive. So we took a bit longer, worked a lot harder and we achieved it. We wanted to share with the industry that green buildings need not be expensive,” says Mr Tang.

With ECs, developers try to cap building prices because of the ceiling cap on selling prices – by virtue of the fact that ECs buyers cannot have an average gross monthly household income in excess of S\$12,000, thus capping their purchase power. When Belysa, which was developed by NTUC Choice Homes and CEL Development, was rolled out in 2011, the income cap was S\$10,000.

It comes down to passive architecture and active architecture, explains Mr Tang. In Belysa’s case, the blocks were designed such that there is no blockage in the front and the back so the flats are well cross-ventilated. Units were also designed to have big openings – casement window and top hung windows – to promote ventilation. In the event of rain, the top hung windows can be left open.

“How informed is the client? How progressive are they? Some clients ask for green buildings for their projects. City Developments Limited (CDL) for instance – their minimum is a Gold Plus Green Mark rating. Of course, you still have developers who don’t believe in it; so when we meet them, we try and share our knowledge. We don’t try to educate, because educate is a big word,” says Mr Tang, who in 2012 was named Green Architect of the Year under the BCA-SGBC Green Building Individual Awards.

Tree House – developed by CDL – is another project that Mr Tang is particularly proud of. Not because of the fact that it is the world’s largest vertical garden – although that no doubt helps – but because of the challenge that it posed.

“(When designing Tree House), there was a lot of haze in Singapore and I thought, how nice it would be if a building can act like a tree and absorb and filter the air. We thought a tree-like design would be good. But we weren’t sure if it’s achievable, since it is 24 storeys high.”

The considerations were tremendous. How do you maintain a 24-storey high green wall? How do you maintain it safely? Will the plants grow, given that the wind is different across the different heights which means that the moisture content is different? What kinds of plants should be used? Should the same plant be used across the entire wall or should different plants be used? What sort of material should the

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structure be made of so that the plant can wrap around it? If it is a flowering plant, will it attract bees? How will residents feel about bees?

“It looks easy, but we had a lot of questions!” says Mr Tang with a laugh.

Another project Mr Tang is excitedly embarking on is that of an executive condominium on Canberra Drive which will use prefabricated prefinished volumetric construction (PPVC) techniques. The project, also by CDL, will see some 3,300 building modules used in the construction of the development in question.

The use of PPVC – prefabricated modules are hoisted into position and assembled like Lego blocks – is expected to increase construction productivity by more than 40 per cent and save some 55,000 man days, than if CDL were to use the conventional construction method.

While ADDP is considered a medium-sized firm within the field, Mr Tang notes that designing green spaces is something that smaller players are opening up to as well.

“Small firms have their own niche. Some of my friends do houses or shophouses, and they come up with interesting solutions. The most typical is a central courtyard for ventilation and light. Another popular trend is using solar power to supplement the grid. Recycling water for normal landscape usage is also an ‘in’ thing for some small projects,” says Mr Tang.

“I think the younger generation is more receptive . . . we don’t just want a roof over our heads. We want something different in our house, a different quality of life.”

THE GREEN ADVANTAGE

As more multi-national corporations and conglomerates have stricter CSR policies, SMEs that demonstrate good



◀ IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

When designing Tree House, considerations included maintaining a 24-storey tall green wall and the types of plants to use

corporate practices are well placed to become suppliers to these companies.

“In this context, CSR does not aim to reinvent the wheel. It is about building on existing good practice, maximising its impact and making a link between CSR and the company’s core business activities,” says Singapore Compact for CSR’s Mr Ang.

But the implementation of sustainable finance requires committed leadership, clear policies, appropriate incentives and good governance, notes NTU’s Dr Charoenwong.

“Top leaders of SMEs must first be holistically convinced that sustainability will bring benefits to their companies. Sustainability practices must get most stakeholders involved, and need to eventually lead to business profit. Because of limited resources, SMEs should avoid initiatives that are merely well-meaning, but do not lead to higher profits. Such initiatives are unsustainable and will fail sooner or later. Chief sustainability officers

must create effective key performance indicators to benchmark their performance and the achievements of the company as a whole,” says Dr Charoenwong.

“Sustainability practices can also help companies identify material sustainability issues, enhance productivity and enhance relationships with shareholders and other key stakeholders through increased communication and information provision. Frequent information distribution about sustainability can also facilitate and uphold a warm corporate culture that boosts goodwill among stakeholders.”

Mr Ang concludes: “The key for SMEs wanting to implement CSR is to identify CSR areas that are relevant to their business, prioritise and draw out a plan that aligns with business objectives. For example, companies today face a shortage of labour and a war for talent. Many SMEs are well-placed to pursue responsible workplace practices which are more family-friendly, such as flexible work arrangement for employees.” ■



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

DREAMING GREEN

THE key to sustainable sustainability is the end-user, says Tang Kok Thye, associate partner at ADDP Architects.

“The real challenge . . . is the user,” he says. “Whatever we are designing, the user must know how to use it. In some projects, we have organic and non-organic pneumatic recycling chutes. People must know what to throw inside the organic chute. The challenge is that people use it, but on the ground, all sorts of things go into the rubbish.”

To bridge this gap, the team has looked at installing more signages, having more developer handover packages and even sharing sessions to educate residents.

“It’s easier for shopping malls where there’s a main MCST (Management Corporation Strata Title), and some of the malls dictate what you can and cannot do. It’s much tougher for residential (projects because after) you sell the units to the owner, they run the building on their own. We spend one to two years to design, three years to build. But the building can last 15-20 years. That’s more important! The first three years is important to set the foundation, but really, the operation part is important – and this is one gap that we are trying to bridge.”

Another trend that he hopes will catch on is the use of ceiling fans, which are commonly used in houses but not apartments. This is because ceiling fans require a certain amount of space to be most effective.

“Because our construction cost, floor to floor height is pretty low so to make the fan work effectively is a challenge. Of course you have standing fans but I hope to see more ceiling fans being used and being implemented in projects so that that when you buy an apartment, not only the aircon is there, the fan is there too.”

Ultimately, the dream is for the day when users drive demand for sustainable designs.

“When demand is there, the market trend will tilt towards that demand. So I hope one day users will be the driver for the green movement. Then, people will know what to do and how to use the building. There will be demand in the market, and automatically, change will come,” says Mr Tang.

▲ IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

Mr Tang’s dream is for the day when users drive demand for sustainable designs