

DESIGN SEMINAR

# THE BUCK STOPS HERE

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**When designers start making informed choices and communicating the benefits clearly to their clients, sustainability becomes not just a viable part of their design practice but a winning element of their clients' marketing strategies.**

**Veronica Simpson listens in on FX's latest sustainability debate**



#### Those taking part were

**Vanessa Brady**  
SBID, president

**Tim Gledstone**  
Squire & Partners, partner

**Elizabeth Lane**  
RPW, FF & E specialist

**Fiona Naylor**  
Johnson Naylor, director

**Ed Price**  
Forme, UK Interior Design  
director

**Mark Russell**  
Hansgrohe, projects account  
manager

**Mark Sait**  
Save money cut carbon,  
director

**Martin Townsend**  
BRE Global, global director  
of sustainability

**Rebecca Whittington**  
The Scarlet hotel, owner

with **Theresa Dowling**  
Chair and FX editorial director

Thanks to Squire and Partners  
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this FX Design Seminar in

**hansgrohe**

Previous pages, left  
**Martin Townsend**  
**Vanessa Brady**

Previous pages right  
**Mark Sait**  
**Rebecca Whittington**

**Above**  
**Tim Gledstone**  
**Elizabeth Lane**

**WHO IS RESPONSIBLE** for ensuring best practice in sustainable sourcing and implementation when it comes to specifying new design schemes? The buck stops with the designer, according to a round table of industry professionals from all quarters of the designer-client-advisory spectrum. But how many designers have the 'cojones' to argue the toss with a client that is only after short-term budgetary gains? And how can the vital role of education be supported – education of clients, customers and designers themselves – in the pursuit of buildings and places that don't, literally, cost the earth?

These and many other key issues were aired during a lively two-hour round-table debate in London at the offices of Squire & Partners, hosted by FX editorial director **Theresa Dowling**, with the sponsorship of Hansgrohe.

Can education be supported in the pursuit of buildings and places that don't, literally, cost the earth?

There was a particularly welcome representation from the client angle, for a change. **Rebecca Whittington** is both owner and designer of the unique hotel The Scarlet in Cornwall (featured in FX November 2013). In this scheme she has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the whole design and service concept impacts positively on the environment, both on the micro and the macro level. For example, when she dismantled the previous unsuitable structure on her hotel's stunning clifftop site to make way for her new, eco-friendly, wooden building, she salvaged all the insulation materials and sent them to be reused in the monkey sanctuary at Looe.

As **Theresa Dowling** said: 'We have clearly come a long way in the hospitality sector. Not so long ago sustainability just meant giving customers the choice to have their towels washed and replaced every day or not – and that wasn't so much about saving the planet as saving staff the time and effort.'

**Vanessa Brady**, president of the Society of British Interior Designers (SBID), agreed: 'About five years ago we started shouting about sustainability, at which time the design industry saw it as another expense and another hurdle. Only coming out of the recession have people >



Left Fiona Naylor  
Mark Russell

really decided it's no longer a tick box, it's something big picture.'

Financial incentives for reducing energy consumption are driving change, especially in the hotel sector, according to **Mark Salt**, director of sustainability consultancy Save Money Cut Carbon. His energy efficiency advice is going down particularly well with major global hotel groups and their 'hard-nosed asset managers', for whom the second biggest cost is utilities.

However, **Martin Townsend**, director of sustainability for BRE Global, felt that the argument for sustainability is now much broader: 'This conversation is surely more about understanding the environmental and socio-economic issues and where you see that return on investment. It's about: how do I make the space in a hotel a good place to come to – the air quality, materials, low CFC, the way I'm servicing that hotel so that it has a good return on investment. People are seeing the case for investing one per cent extra on fabrication cost to add value.'

## People are seeing the case for investing one per cent extra on fabrication cost to add value

The recent recession has clearly focused commercial priorities both on building performance as well as consumer expectations. And legislation has played its part, as **Fiona Naylor**, director of Johnson Naylor, attested. Currently designing many luxury apartments in new residential buildings, she finds the spec for materials and equipment is very much driven by current building guidelines for energy performance, materials sourcing and CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility.

But it can't be left to the legislators to drive change – especially when governments are constantly moving the green agenda goal posts.

Legislation can also be a barrier to good practice, as **Rebecca Whittington** found both in constructing her hotel to exceed current 'best practice' guidelines and also when trying to persuade her insurers to certify a hotel building made entirely of wood – due to lack of precedent it was seen as almost uninsurable. But she was driven by a much more holistic vision of what sustainability could mean. 'People have grabbed a particular metric and said as long as you're carbon neutral you're fine,' she said. 'Every single decision you make is complex and is a compromise. To me sustainability is about attempting to choose well and in each circumstance you have to balance [goals for] sustainability with durability, and whether it delivers what you need it to deliver.'

'There's no authority on measuring that,' as **Theresa Dowling** noted. 'But in the end the authority is the customer,' said **Fiona Naylor**. 'It's gradually happening that all these massive changes are being driven by society. The customers will demand that – certainly the ones I see are.'

'Metrics should be about life-cycle impacts,' suggested **Martin Townsend**. 'I might choose a material to clad my building that will be cheaper but only last five years. It's better to choose one that will last longer.'

Clearly it's easier to achieve greater impact with a new build than it is to transform an existing building into something truly sustainable. But **Mark Russell**, projects accounts manager for Hansgrohe, felt that there were easy wins here. And he had a folder bulging with examples to prove it – such as a hotel he refitted last year with £65,000-worth of high-performance showers. 'Within eight months they had recouped £100,000 [in energy savings],' he said: 'I know the asset manager there and if I'd gone to him and said green, green, green, he'd have shut the door. Selling on performance is the key. Now suddenly he's asking: what else can you do for me?'

**Vanessa Brady** felt that for real change to happen there must be three drivers: consumer awareness, government legislation and money (ie savings). Education is key, however. And that's where conflicting messages – whether buying green has to cost more and can look as good as either the more 'luxurious' or cheaper but less eco-friendly alternatives – and lack of understanding are still a huge handicap. But enlightenment is emerging from surprising >

Right Theresa Dowling, FX  
Ed Price

sources, as **Martin Townsend** revealed: smart billing has hit the mass market. Apparently, Whitbread now practices this. He said: 'When you print your bill at the end [of your meal] it tells you what the impact was.'

**Tim Gledstone**, partner at Squire and Partners, suggested that a real shift has to occur at the lower end of the market where a lot of key design decisions can end up being driven not just by cost but by risk aversion and health and safety agendas. He said: 'Lots of hotels below five star don't even want windows that open, in case their customers jump out of them. So often for hotels it's [about] protecting the occupant from the environment.'

Never mind natural ventilation, when it comes to FF&E, there's also a long way to go according to **Elizabeth Lane**, FF&E specialist at RPW: 'When we're tasked by operators and owners on the projects we work on, it's all about the cost. Sustainability doesn't come into it. They might say source things locally and you may go to a lot of trouble, and then they tender it out and end up shipping it all from China - because it's all about the money.' On the up-side, **Ed Price** of Forme UK felt that regulations on lighting have done a great deal to drive improvements: 'That's driving a lot of the choices on products used and that, in turn, is driving companies to manufacture products that are more efficient.'

One of the biggest problems, according to **Rebecca Whittington**, is 'We have people in legislation dictating about energy and energy conservation who don't know about things on the ground. We had a big debate about baths because baths use far more water than showers. We have grey-water recycling, but we realised that we don't have [enough] water flushing through our systems [to support baths]. We had to adjust our decision-making to look at the whole picture. That's the challenge with simplistic regulation.'

**Martin Townsend** felt the problem with regulation is that it is 'silo-based', which causes problems when you want to make holistic decisions. 'You have to change the business model. If you're refurbishing a hotel, you might say to suppliers: here's my base line consumption. I want to do a reverse bidding process and you can come to me and demonstrate how you can save me money and water. Have a beauty parade with a reverse bidding process.'



## The problem with legislation is that it is 'silo-based', causing problems in making holistic decisions

Hansgrohe's **Mark Russell** was delighted with that suggestion - 'that's what we do already,' he said. Hansgrohe is one of a growing number of manufacturers taking on the onus of educating its clients - it even runs an RIBA-approved CPD module on water conservation and sanitaryware. However, **Vanessa Brady** was concerned that, by and large, 'there isn't any knowledge transfer between designer and manufacturers. Designers will frequently say they want a product by its look, not by its function or performance.'

This leads us to one of the major hazards a designer now has to navigate: the availability

of cheap copies of more reputable products. **Mark Russell** is clearly concerned at the rate of patent infringement. 'It costs £200,000 a year to keep a patent alive. Fourteen years ago we'd develop a product and it would be copied within three years. Now it's less than nine months. But what they don't do is go to the material DNA. What's important is the material we choose to make it [the product] from at the very beginning. Different metals will have different duration. We have absolute evidence where Far Eastern manufacturers have copied Hansgrohe, but have brought in a different type of brass with higher lead content, and we can prove that when you start to test it, it starts to fail.'

**Vanessa Brady** felt that designers ultimately have to learn to present the best choices in a language their clients will understand: for the domestic residential market, for example, 'I say to people that [the skills of a designer] will save you the cost of two holidays.' For commercial clients, 'when I talk about design I talk in terms of statistics and I get a completely different >



reaction. You have to speak in the language that the end-user is interested in.'

One particularly hard nut to crack, however, is the nightclub and restaurant sector, with its high turnover of interior fit-outs. **Vanessa Brady** cited a recent interior project at a Hard Rock Café, where 'everything had to be ripped out and binned. Everything had to go in 24 hours. But a nightclub has a two-year turnaround. The fit-out now of a club is between £1m and £3m. It's a massive investment. I don't understand why there's not more legislative pull to drive sustainability in this sector.'

Consumer power can go a long way here – as they are increasingly doing in retail, according to **Fiona Naylor**. 'We work with M&S and it, like a lot of big chains, realise that if it makes moves on customer issues and sustainability, and that goes through its store fit-outs – reusing, recycling store equipment – and also applying those rules to its supply chain, the customers like it. They like the story it's telling and that story is becoming part of the brand. That trickles down in the end.'

But customers aren't always pushing in the 'green' direction, as **Rebecca Whittington** found

## You can be living in a high-quality building and generating money from it. It's about buildings as positive forces

in her other hotel, the Bedruthan in Newquay, where she'd specified Trevira fabrics – 'which are bulletproof'. After seven years, she found a customer saying the furnishings were looking 'tired'. They weren't. 'But they were saying we just want it to look different.' So she's changed her strategy. 'Now I design with a base layer that is neutral and high quality and a top layer that can be changed more easily.'

**Martin Townsend** suggested that the energy performance and sustainability credentials of houses should be expressed in terms of sustainability-related grades – 'so that people can make a choice; when they see there's a label on [their] domestic building that says X and [they decide they] want to move into a different, more sustainable building. We need to create

that consumer demand. We are at the point now where you can have energy-positive buildings. You can have buildings that produce more energy than they consume. So you can be living in a high-quality building and generating money from it. It's about buildings as positive forces.' The same kind of grading could also work for hotels, restaurants and shops – like a Fairtrade kitemark that could be worn as a sustainability 'badge of honour'.

The more clearly – and reliably – these values can be expressed to the consumer, the more persuasive and far-reaching the sustainable agenda will become. With her own hotel's performance as evidence of this demand – The Scarlet's repeat business currently exceeds 80 per cent, with occupancies around the same level as London hotels – **Rebecca Whittington** knows what she is talking about when she says: 'It's about enabling positive choices.' **FX**

**Above, l-r**  
**Mark Russell**  
**Fiona Naylor**  
**Ed Price**  
**Vanessa Brady**  
**Rebecca Whittington**  
**Martin Townsend**