

4th May 2017

Reflections on Ecobuild, 2017

This was my first ever visit to the annual Ecobuild convention. I went with two objectives in mind: first, to get a clearer sense of the sorts of sustainable building products and materials that are available to the construction industry; and, second, to network with manufacturers and promote the UH/Tarmac research project.

The first thing that struck me upon entering the vast arena at the Excel Centre was the enormous array of businesses and organisations represented, including trade and industry bodies (such as the Institution of Civil Engineering), research and development organisations (BRE, for example), as well as manufacturers and materials suppliers (with manufacturers outnumbering materials suppliers by a considerable margin).

As I circulated the convention, it struck me that – in spite of the workshops and presentations on strategic issues (including one from Michael Portillo on Brexit and Donald Trump...) – it was very much a sales environment, rather than a forum for researching products and materials. For this reason, my networking ambitions were somewhat disappointed, as most of those I attempted to talk with had little interest in taking time talking about a university research project (however noble in intent and however, ultimately, relevant to their industry and products).

It also occurred to me that a lot of what was on display as ‘sustainable’ seemed somewhat mainstream. Could this be, I wondered, a manifestation of ‘greenwashing’, with claims to sustainability being exaggerated in order to impress a market segment? Or is it the case that, in fact, the bar has been raised considerably, in recent years, vis-à-vis sustainable building products and materials, such that we rather take a lot of them for granted?

Back to the networking, when I did succeed in chatting with exhibitors about the research project, I encountered varying degrees of interest, from polite acknowledgement of a virtuous piece of scholarship to a more whole-hearted endorsement of the project’s aims and objectives. Most I spoke with had pretty clear ideas as to what they believed were the barriers to the use of more sustainable building products and materials. The interesting thing from a research point of view, however, was the absence of consensus in this respect, with different exhibitors mentioning finance, lack of skilled labour (for fitting innovative components), and lack of knowledge, or even awareness, regarding what is on the market in terms of sustainable building products and materials. As the project reaches its primary data collection phase, we will be able to probe these seemingly contradictory perspectives in more depth.

Dr John McCormack