Growing Green

'Greenwash' just doesn't wash any more. All of us are wiser when it comes to the environment, and it is harder today to get away with peddling a unsubstantiated line when selling products. **Aidan Walker** talks to the professionals whose work defines the meaning of the word 'green'.

When it comes to the environment, many facilities managers have come to the conclusion that there is no single, totally reliable and authoritative source of information.

People are still arguing and interpreting, discovering new knowledge and, what's more concerning, applying generous amounts of spin to half-understood facts to suit a marketing agenda.

This 'greenwashing' is all too common the cynical appropriation of pseudo-scientific language; and lipservice paid to environmental standards in the name of sales.

Also, the practice of 'mitigation' – measures taken to offset the effect of global warming – is increasingly coming under scrutiny. Practices such as carbon offsetting, carbon trading, and adding oxygen to the air by planting trees in one place while continuing to pollute it in another are starting to be seen by some as 'unacceptable'.

So where do we go from here? How do we make the move from an industrial age to a ecological age? Well, contemporary thinking suggests that our design and manufacturing processes are in desperate need of overhaul to ween us off our 'disposable' approach to products and materials. 'Sustainablity' is the new standard by which projects and items are judged as 'green', or environmentally friendly.

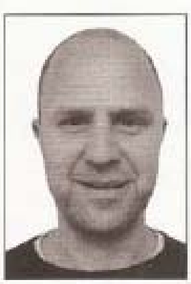
Stephen Phillips of the product design department of global building consultancy Arup, thinks that the onus is on firms like his to shape the agenda. Arup has developed a programme known as 'Spear', analysing environmental, social, economic and resourcing issues, while assessesing the extent, and benefit of sustainable strategies throughout all aspects and all stages of a project.

Having worked on a number of projects in this area for Arup, his suggestions for improving green practice and sustainablity include:

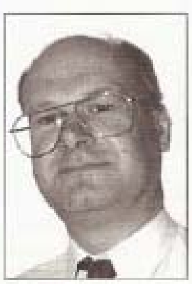
- Forget globalisation. By sourcing locally manufactured building, interior and furniture products you will dramatically reducing the product's carbon footprint.
- Technology can help. Remote IT access from home to the company server reduces the need for workers to travel to the office on a daily basis, thus reducing fuel costs. In 1950, the average Briton travelled five miles a day; today it's more than 30 miles and forecast to double again in the next two decades. Encouraging your workforce to work locally can reduce the consumption of energy.
- Similarly, the use of telephone and video conferencing means that individuals can be part of a meeting, without having to travel to get to the meeting location. Ensuring your workforce can use this relatively simple technology can reduce the need to travel.
- Encourage your workers to travel to the office by bike – this will promote excercise and reduce fuel consumption.
- Microgenerate your own electricity. This can be done by small businesses using solar or wind power to meet their own heating or electricity needs with any surplus energy exported back onto the grid.
- Try to encourage the use of laptops. Why use a desktop PC both at home and at the office, when you can use a single laptop for both? Use of a laptop also means the furniture used will be smaller with fewer components, materials and a smaller footprint.

Phillips' list continues, and materials play a big part. "Take-apart technology allows materials to be separated at the end of their service for recycling or re-use," he says. "Make sure that the components used on furniture can be unscrewed, unclipped and separated into their base material parts ready for re-smelting, remoulding or rechipping."

It is also crucial to ensure that your supplier or manufacturer is set up to disassemble and manage that suite of processes that see components taking on a new life.



Stephen Phillips



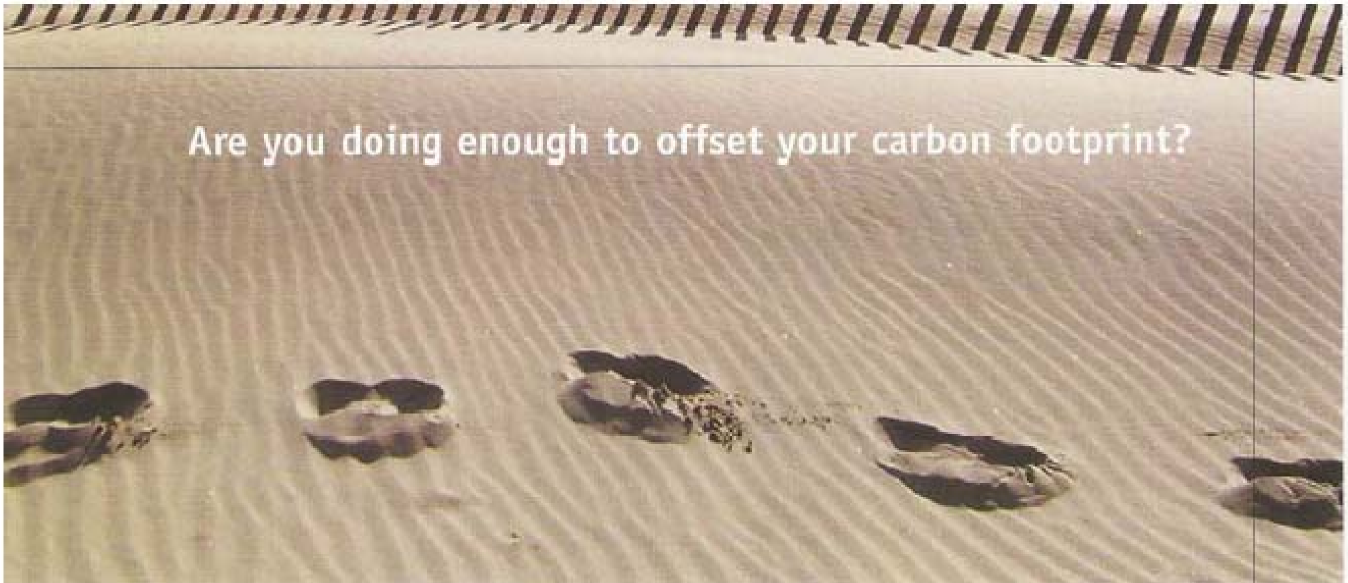
Mike Lear

Arthur Lamb

Jorgen Josefsson

Home-grown technology

As you would expect from an organisation like Arup, the preaching goes along with the practice. "The 'Technik' floor developed by Arup and Grants uses a base board manufactured using 95% raw materials,"



says Phillips. "It reduces the need for an energy intensive sand and cement screed floor." The substrate is made from recycled paper, and the environmental assessment (admittedly, Arup's own) of the product puts it a long way ahead of similar systems on the market in terms of sustainability.

Arthur Lamb, sales director of Cambridge-based interior design and fit-out group Breathe, works at a different point in the supply chain but agrees. His experience is that it is the 'blue chips' that often have the most sophisticated environmental policies and the staff and infrastructure to make sure that their buying strategies fit. "With the smaller companies it's all about price," he says.

Lamb takes a dim view of irresponsible selling. He is proud that his company will ask a client what it plans to do with the furniture it is replacing: "Breathe is now working with Greenworks, the not-for-profit organisation that either re-uses and re-sells furniture or failing that ships it to the third world," he explains. "The furniture could be made into storage cubes, or school desks might be created out of old desktops. They might ship a container-load overseas. The cargo arrives at its destination ready to take on a new lease of life.

Although there is a small price tag, the practice may eventually pay for itself," says Lamb: "Who pays? The client. But it isn't a great deal of money, perhaps £400 or £500 for a container to go abroad, and there is a PR and marketing pay-off as well."

Cradle-to-cradle thinking

The point is that the designer/supplier is offering this kind of disposal as part of its service, and clearly takes that responsibility. Lamb is clear that towing the environmental line makes good business sense; and as long as you can persuade your client that the cost is worth bearing, everyone benefits.

For best environmental practice among

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manufacturers Lamb thinks that Steelcase is top of the heap. The 'Think' chair, for instance, the first product to ever receive 'Cradle to Cradle' Product Certification from McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry, the US consultancy that invented the term, is 98% recyclable by weight and takes five minutes to disassemble with common hand tools.

But it's also about the packaging and transport, says Lamb. "Not just because of Think, but overall because of Steelcase's environmental thinking, they have been able to take the equivalent of 18,000 trucks off the roads."

For Jorgen Josefsson of seating manufacturers RH Form, the only way to meet environmental objectives is to approach the whole thing as a broad management issue. "Marketing an office chair as 99% recyclable or whatever is all well and good, but how many managers, when ready to dispose of used chairs, are going to start dismantling and recycling the old furniture?" he asks: "How many would even know how to go about beginning such a process? Understandably, the vast majority will just throw the chair away to inevitably end up as landfill more often than not, so ultimately not even 1% can be recycled.

Josefsson takes that view that it's more sensible for the manufacturer to offer the recycling service as part of the sales package, picking up and disposing of the chair once it is no longer needed by the original purchaser.

Managing lighting schemes

Good management practice is also essential when it comes to lighting, says product manager Mike Lear at RS Components, the global supplier of a wide range of commercial products for business, science and industry. "Lighting is at the forefront of the environmental agenda for building designers and managers," he says. "It is one of the few products whose main environmental impact is felt during its use rather than its manufacture and transportation."

As such, there is a real onus on the FM or building manager to not only specify the right products in the first place but also to implement effective maintenance, cleaning and replacement systems. And because a well designed and managed lighting scheme will be good for the environment and the balance sheet, it presents a great opportunity for the FM to demonstrate how they add value.

Lear also makes the point – an increasingly familiar one in the debate – that sustainability and energy efficiency is as much about behaviour as it is about technical solutions. "Some people are mushrooms requiring very little light, while others only seem to flourish under bright lights. Photocells are available, which can provide a degree of personal control, but in many cases the only solution is a bit of give and take from everybody. Compromises must be made by individuals as well as organisations. We're all in this together." ■