Q&A: Tony Arnel

The Green Building Council of Australia’s Tony Arnel, who chairs the GBCA board, reflects on his time helming the World Green Building Council.

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The Cato Manor Project provides a clear demonstration that green building practices are not just for the wealthy. In this instance, the project will help the residents decrease their living costs, improve their health and well-being, as they no longer need to burn paraffin, which is responsible for many respiratory problems, gain valuable job skills and work opportunities, not to mention reduce their impact on the environment.

Eco: Why are you leaving – has your term finished, and what are your thoughts about stepping down – relief, regret or satisfaction?
TA: It’s my personal belief that a collaborative international organisation such as the World Green Building Council must have a wide variety of talented leaders. I was fortunate to spend three years as the chairman of the WorldGBC, but am of the view that we must have shared leadership to continue to further the global green building movement. I’ve enjoyed the last three years immensely, and am proud to hand over the reins to the USGBC’s Rick Fedrizzi.

Eco: What do you think has been the biggest change in the realm of green buildings during the course of your stewardship of the WorldGBC?
TA: The most significant shift is that green building is no longer seen through the lens of environmental responsibility, but is increasingly understood as a mechanism to support a range of socio-economic priorities, such as job creation, affordable housing, energy security and better productivity, health and general well-being. We’re no longer just talking about green buildings, but green communities and their role in our future.

Just recently, as a sideline to the UN’s COP17 climate change summit in Durban, the WorldGBC and the South African Green Building Council opened an entire “green street” in a disadvantaged South African community. Each of the houses in the street were retrofitted with green building technologies such as solar hot water systems and rainwater collection tanks, as well as fitted with roof insulation and heat-insulation cookers.

Eco: What was your biggest challenge? Was there anything about the role that was frustrating?
TA: My greatest challenge was to reform the WorldGBC’s governance structure. While this was challenging at the time, it has resulted in more effective committees now delivering measurable outcomes at an international level. For instance, we now have five regional networks – in Asia-Pacific, Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East – which enable the WorldGBC to identify regional priorities more easily and respond with specialised support and action. We’re clearly seeing the results of this new regional model in action – with more green building councils being established and very effective relationships with governments being established around the globe.

Eco: What did you most enjoy about the role?
TA: Working with so many talented and passionate green building leaders has been personally very satisfying. Leading by example is one of the most important ways to effect change in our industry, and I have been privileged to work alongside a number of exceptional leaders, such as Ché Wall, who founded both the WorldGBC and Green Building Council of Australia, the USGBC’s President, Rick Fedrizzi, and founder and first staff president of the USGBC, David Gottfried. These people demonstrate that true leadership starts with a strong set of guiding principles and an unswerving commitment to “doing well by doing good”.

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Eco: With what accomplishment as WorldGBC chair are you most satisfied?
TA: Certainly, our membership has grown exponentially over the past three years. Increasingly, GBCs recognise the value of being involved in an organisation that is providing practical, tangible results – and the fact that we now have 90 GBCs, up from just eight in 2002, is a real testament to that.

Eco: How would you like the “TA era” of the WorldGBC to be remembered?
TA: I hope it is remembered as a time of rapid growth and change, and as the era during which green building moved from being a “boutique industry” to a mainstream movement.

Eco: Can you see a time when “green” will be the default setting for new buildings – are we there yet?
TA: We are certainly on our way in some mature markets. In Australia, for instance, 18 per cent of our CBD office space is now Green Star-certified, and
our leading developers and builders consider Green Star “business as usual”. The Property Council of Australia’s 2012 Guide to Office Quality has equated “Premium” with a 5 Star Green Star rating. Similar trends can be seen in other mature markets such as the US and Canada.

At the same time, the challenge for developing countries is to transform their built environments while addressing the legitimate aspirations of millions of people who still have no access to electricity, clean water or adequate shelter.

Eco: Who in your travels did you find the most inspiring?

TA: I find the people working at the grassroots level in green building councils especially inspiring. At the WorldGBC’s Congress in Toronto, I met a number of enthusiastic leaders of emerging green building councils. For example, the woman who founded the Morocco Green Building Council, Siham Omri, said that she waited a couple of years for a GBC to be established in Morocco and when one wasn’t, “I did not have a choice but to start one myself, in order to have my country join and lead the global green building movement.”
Eco: Do you have a favourite green building?

TA: I have to say the Victorian Building Commission’s office, Goods Shed North. It was once the largest railway shed ever built in Melbourne. Were the engine drivers from the golden age of Victoria’s railways to see their workplace today, they wouldn’t recognise it. With a 5 Star Green Star rating for office design demonstrating “Australian Excellence”, Goods Shed North shows that Green Star standards are not limited to new buildings, but with innovation and commitment can be achieved in heritage-listed buildings too.

Eco: What’s your favourite city architecturally?

TA: While I love many of the world’s iconic cities, such as New York and Paris, Melbourne will always be my favourite city. I am very proud of Melbourne’s commitment to greening its built environment. From Council House 2, which achieved Australia’s first 6 Star Green Star rating in 2005, to the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, which is considered the world’s greenest, Melbourne has dozens of spectacular Green Star-rated buildings. The Melbourne Docklands, where I work, has the highest concentration of Green Star-rated buildings in the country.

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Eco: The carbon price; your thoughts?

TA: The Green Building Council of Australia is supportive of a price on carbon, provided it is accompanied by complementary measures that support the property and construction industry. These complementary measures are crucial: energy-efficiency incentives such as tax breaks and white certificates, investment in research, development and commercialisation of low-emissions technologies, and mandatory disclosure.

Eco: What would you be doing if not chair of the GBCA?

TA: I currently sit on the board of the Sustainable Melbourne Fund, am a member of the Australian Building Codes Board, as well as being the Victorian Building and Plumbing commissioner. These roles, together with my role as chair of the Green Building Council of Australia, enable me to pursue my passion, which is to create a sustainable future for my grandchildren, and all Australians.

Tony Arnel’s favourite green building is Goods Shed North.