Putting Singapore on the global map for green buildings

In five short years since it was established, the Singapore Green Building Council has put Singapore on the global map for its excellence in green building practices. Vaidehi Shah traces the industry-led NGO's origin and progress.

While it is unusual for any government to be involved in setting up NGOs (non-government organizations), this did not deter Singapore’s building authority in helping to create the city-state’s first industry-led organization to champion green building awareness some five years ago.

Never did they imagine that the fledgling Singapore Green Building Council would grow and evolve to become a powerful green building advocate that would put Singapore on the global map.
SGBC’s founding president, Lee Chuan Seng, recounts how the idea was one of the recommendations from an international panel of experts invited by the Building and Construction Authority (BCA) to review and improve the authority’s green building master plan and certification scheme, called the Green Mark, back in 2008.

The experts, some of whom were board members of the World Green Building Council (WGBC), recommended that an NGO be set up in Singapore to champion the green building cause by providing independent product certification and raising industry awareness.

This NGO would also engage with international NGOs like WGBC to share resources and knowledge, says Lee, who is retired chairman of engineering firm Beca.

He tells Eco-Business in a recent interview: “We were all scratching our heads when they suggested that the industry set up an NGO to champion the green building cause, because till then, we had been more focused on making buildings green than in setting up councils.”

The idea took hold and the industry rallied together to support the idea with surprising speed. By the next year, SGBC was set up with seed funding and secretariat support from BCA.

Ng Eng Kiong, SGBC’s current and third president, remembers that “it was challenging to get people from all different industry sectors – manufacturing, government, academia and consulting – to come together as one movement. But eventually, we got buy-in for what SGBC was trying to do”.

One of SGBC’s first initiatives was to certify green building products and advocate green building design, practices and technologies amongst the industry and general public. This later expanded to include certifying green building services in 2012.

WGBC also supported the idea of an organisation that represented Singapore’s green building industry because it saw a global demand for Singapore’s expertise in greening tropical buildings, says Lee.

SGBC applied to be a member of WGBC in May 2009 and was recognised as a full member within a year - a record speed, notes Lee, winning it global recognition and access to WGBC’s international networks.

**Promoting public-private partnerships for green buildings**

SGBC also showcased the role that governments could play in strengthening sustainable construction efforts in a country. Tan Tian Chong, SGBC’s second vice president, recalls that WGBC was impressed with the public-private partnership model they saw in Singapore.
He tells Eco-Business: “The WGBC chair actually said that Singapore’s building sector had the best incentives in the world”, referring to incentives for developers and product manufacturers to adopt sustainability practices such as the Green Mark Incentive Scheme for New Buildings and Green Mark Incentive Scheme for Existing Buildings.

SGBC says that working closely with BCA was a key factor in increasing the credibility of the work done by both organisations. Tan, who is also group director of BCA’s Technology Development Group, explains that BCA was keen for SGBC to be set up because “the use of sustainable products counts towards a building’s eventual Green Mark certification, and we wanted an organisation like SGBC to make sure that this product certification process was rigorous and authoritative”.

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- Ng Eng Kiong, President, Singapore Green Building Council

WGBC’s conviction of the effectiveness of the public-private partnership model in Singapore opened up new opportunities for them to engage with green building councils in other countries.

They launched the ‘Government Leadership Awards’ in 2011 to highlight the role of national and city leadership in enhancing the sustainability of the building sector. Singapore clinched the ‘Regional Leadership Award’ in the inaugural awards.

WGBC also released a publication on ‘A new era in building partnerships’ in September 2013, which says that collaboration between governments, NGOs and industry are a necessary step to meet future challenges in achieving sustainable built environments globally. Here too, Singapore’s experience has been cited as an exemplary case study.

Today, SGBC shares its expertise on how the government and industry sectors can work together effectively to set up and administer green building councils, with requests coming in from as far as Morocco, Columbia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tanzania.

**Local membership, global benefits**

Closer to home, SGBC has built up a membership base of almost 430 companies in the five short years since its launch. Its members, who pay an annual membership fee of S$1,500, include manufacturers of construction products, architecture and engineering firms, building developers, consulting firms, and government agencies amongst others.
In 2010, SGBC launched a green building product certification scheme which has since certified close to 700 products certified across 17 broad categories.

In 2012, SGBC also launched Singapore’s first green services certification scheme in consultation with members which focused on the delivery of consulting services in the areas of consulting in architecture, environmental sustainability design, quantity surveying, energy performance contracting and electrical engineering. The scheme has certified 42 services to date.

Yvonne Soh, SGBC’s general manager, shares that its members - most of which conduct business in Singapore and overseas - benefit significantly from having the sustainable qualities of their products and services certified under a scheme supported by Singapore’s industry and agencies.

“The certification brands our member companies when they want to participate in regional and global jobs, and the endorsement helps them open doors”, she says.

Lee adds, “There are more than 2,000 projects in Singapore that are Green Mark certified, and some 200 projects overseas that have applied for Green Mark certification. Nobody asked these overseas projects to get the Green Mark, but they came to Singapore to get the certification nevertheless. This points to the attractiveness of the Singapore brand”.

SGBC’s member companies agree that this certification has been beneficial to them.

Jason Chang, managing director of wood company Pacific Forest Products commends SGBC’s stringent standards and shares that “the certification approval is definitely a great value to the business as it adds reliability and trust to our product”.

Joseph Yong, chief operating officer of steelwork company NatSteel Holdings, adds that membership in SGBC has enhanced the company’s engagement with sustainability issues.

He says: “Our partnership with SGBC as one of its founding members reflects our belief that NatSteel can play a role in driving sustainable development in Singapore. Being a part of the SGBC fraternity has given NatSteel the opportunity to learn and share best practices with other green advocates in the industry”.

SGBC also fosters capacity building within the sector by organising regular seminars and workshops for members. It also facilitates access to global conferences such as the annual International Green Building Conference which will be held in Singapore this September and the WGBC Congress, which will take place in Brazil this August.
Sustainable succession

The organisation’s leaders say that the key to SGBC’s continued success is to ensure a seamless transfer of knowledge between generations of leaders, and that diverse ideas are promoted within its membership.

SGBC’s president, who has to be elected from member organisations and nominated by the board, spends two years as the council’s first vice president, followed by two more as active president, and a final two in an ‘Immediate past president’ role in which he or she mentors the new incumbent president.

Lee explains that due to the impact of product and service certifications on the business prospects of companies in the building industry, ensuring that the system remains neutral and independent is a top priority. The leadership framework helps to prevent profit-driven interests from taking over and compromising the credibility of the certification scheme, he adds.

Lee notes: “The diversity of ideas is also a key priority that helps SGBC improve green building standards in Singapore because there are so many different disciplines involved in designing and operating green buildings. No one lasts for ever, and no one has the best ideas”.

Lee reflects that serving as SGBC’s founding president and then mentor has been an “immensely rewarding experience”, due to the quality of members who have voluntarily served on technical committees for developing certification criteria and speaker panels at events organised by SGBC.

“Going forward, SGBC will be working with other organisations, especially our corporate members to engage with end users to push innovations, support research and collaboration, and also to continue to lead engagement with overseas parties to share our Green Building expertise”, he says.

For more information on SGBC, visit http://sgbc.sg.

For more information on SGBC’s Singapore Green Building Product Certification Scheme, visit http://www.sgbc.sg/green-certifications.