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Environmental sustainability: Hospitality, economy and culture

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Prior to the economic collapse of 2008, environmental sustainability was gaining momentum within the hospitality and development industries of the United States. As these industries struggled to regain lost ground, sustainability took a back seat. To fully understand why this occurred and how to shape the future of sustainability in industry, we must consider culture in addition to economy.

The definition of sustainability according to Webster's: of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged. It is an outdated notion that we can build without regard to the impact of the environment and the community. But have we gone far enough? If we look at the world from a global perspective how do we ensure that we are not depleting the resources.

In an economic environment where deals are fragile, proformas are tight, and financing is difficult, the options for architectural, engineering and operational sustainability are often sacrificed in order to make a deal "work." Codes instituted by state and municipal governments create minimum standards for sustainability that vary from state to state. Unfortunately, these minimums fall short of creating a sustainability-oriented culture within the development industry. The most pressing challenge to this industry is maintaining growth while preventing regional or even global resource depletion.

Balance

In "Collapse: How Societies Choose or Fail to Succeed," Jared Diamond discusses the balance between resource renewal relative to level of consumption in small civilizations. This balance, he argues, was the defining factor among the civilizations that survived and prospered. Diamond uses the example of the Easter Island civilizations to illustrate how competition over scarce resources ultimately caused a society to fail. It is speculated that the tribes sculpted the famous Easter Island heads competing with each other to impress the gods. Large stone heads were moved to remote locations on the island using valuable trees. Diamond conjures an image of the failing tribes cutting down the island's last tree, thereby dooming their survival. Consider this example in application to contemporary society. Our fundamental dependence on fresh water, energy, food and shelter has not changed; it is merely disguised in the breadth and complexity of modern living. Our collective global consumption is simply drawing too heavily on available resources. In order to make sustainability a priority in the United States, the false perception of unlimited resources, excessive consumption, and license to waste that pervades our culture must be challenged. Balance must be struck on a larger scale in order for the economic and environmental benefits of sustainability to be realized.

Free market economic theory postulates that when economic benefit for sustainable options exists then those options will be used. Higher energy prices will motivate the use of alternative energy or

energy-saving technologies. However, such parameters tend to result in reactive decision-making. A wealth of knowledge, technology and innovation instead allows us the opportunity to determine proactive responses towards sustainability in the development industry. For example, encouraging simple conservation as a cultural tendency to prolong the life cycle of a product or to repurpose a product causes a significant reduction in resource use. This allows for more effective resource use and growth throughout multiple industries.

Culture

I have lived in Denmark and Singapore and worked on projects in 21 different countries other than the US. Smaller, perhaps more mature, countries and societies maximize sustainable options mostly because they cannot afford not to. Denmark was practicing conservation and engineering methods 30 years ago that we are only touching on today. Many countries do not have the physical resources that the US has, to be able to afford disposability and waste. Perhaps it is easier for them to culturalize the need for sustainability and prioritize it over popularity and fad because of homogeneous demographics or because they are small and have easier political mechanisms for consensus and policy. How can we reverse our cultural tendency to sacrifice sustainable options in development? Can other materials and equipment be options to value engineer in order to afford the premium of sustainable options? Can the consumer market accept or be educated to accept the sacrifice of fad and excess for the benefit of keeping the varied list of sustainable materials, technology, and processes that come at a premium cost?

Whether one's beliefs on the need for resource conservation or environmental action come from political ideology or not, indeed regardless of whether one believes resource depletion or climate change is happening at all, there is a simple exercise that should move our societies toward consensus and hopefully, action. If we opt for behaviors and culture that conserve our resources and our environment and we are wrong, we do not harm ourselves. If we do not modify our behaviors because we think that resources are proliferate and renewable and we are wrong, we doom ourselves.

There is speculation that if the developing countries of India and China consume at the per capita level of Americans we will need to have the resources of three Earths. If that is correct, we can no longer wait for the next person to take the initiative, or to await the next minimum building code. Every effort we make individually and collectively toward any sustainable action will make a difference. As a consultant in the hospitality and development industry we must be better prepared and more active in providing owners with sustainable options that can improve their investments and developments. Market interest in these options will embolden manufacturers and suppliers to offer more solutions making the economic impact more palatable.

Cultural habits and preconceptions, developed through the generations, are very hard to change. However, with education and information networks, it is hoped that a change can occur much faster than has historically been the case. The stakes are getting higher.

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