

New Kid on the Block

There's a new player in the burgeoning sustainable construction assessment market; SKA Rating (www.ska-rating.com). But with so many other methods of measuring green building now available to choose from, how does SKA Rating compare?

Advertised as a new environmental assessment tool for sustainable fit-outs, SKA Rating is the result of a research project initiated in 2005 by Skansen (the interior construction company - hence the name). SKA Rating became publicly available after the RICS formally took it over in September 2009.

Office fit-out

Currently aimed solely at the UK office fit-out market, its unique selling points are its accessibility and affordability. The methodology is good practice. In fact this system lists 99 Good Practice Measures divided across the different areas of Energy and Co2, Waste, Water, Pollution, Transport, Materials and Wellbeing. For example, Good Practice Measure No.24 is that all timber used in the fit-out should either be reclaimed, or if new, from one of the specified forest certification schemes which will provide a full chain of custody for the timber supplied. Good Practice Measure No.2 is that a demolition salvage plan be prepared prior to site work and carried out in the construction phase to make sure as much waste is diverted from landfill as possible. Each Good Practice Measure is set out on a data sheet, containing an explanation of the measure, the rationale behind it and guidance on how to achieve it. The system recognises that all projects are different according to the building it is part of and the employer's requirements so the project will only be assessed against those measures that are applicable to it. Depending on the percentage of applicable measures that are achieved, a project will achieve either a: Bronze (25%), Silver (50%) or Gold (75%) SKA Rating.

More importantly, the SKA Rating system aims to tackle two issues that have been problematic in some other green assessment methods, to ensure that the projects with a SKA Rating are really the result of best practice measures and not just greenwash.

Order of priority

Firstly, some assessment methods can be distorted by users only going for the most easily achievable

measures. SKA Rating lists the measures in order of priority to indicate those that are the most important from a sustainability perspective. Projects then have to achieve a certain number of the highest ranked "gateway" measures in order to obtain a rating. This is aimed to prevent design and build teams only picking the low hanging fruit.

Secondly, the assessment process is split into three stages: design, construction and post-occupancy assessment. The importance of the last of the three stages has been highlighted recently with the creation of the Soft Landings User Group (www.softlandings.org.uk) which aims to recognise and overcome problems beyond building handover. After all, what use is green technology in the built environment if the end users cannot make the most of it through lack of training or other practical hurdles?

Self-assessment

So far there have only been a handful of certified projects, but you would be wrong to assume that this is a popularity issue. The scheme is only a year old and more importantly a free version of the system is available online so that anybody with an interest can informally self-assess a project, as an alternative to paying an accredited assessor to award you a Rating. It has won a number of awards, and the easy to use interactive online assessment tool only adds to the attraction.

Reinstatement

SKA Rating aims to instil best practice measures into the actions of all those involved in fit-out works; landlords, developers, tenants, consultants, contractors and product suppliers. But what remains to be seen is how the use of the system will inter-play with traditional landlord and tenant relationships where landlords usually require a tenant to put leased premises back into a state agreed at the outset of the lease on its termination. This directly contradicts the SKA Rating ethos of reusing and recycling what is already in situ rather than starting from scratch with each new tenant. Landlords concerned about keeping their portfolios tenanted with decent rates in these economically uncertain times may be reticent about moving away from their tried and tested methods even though the cost of excessive energy consumption, concerns about

brand perception and the importance of staff engagement all point towards the increased use of such schemes. For lasting impact, awareness of sustainable fit-out options needs to grow not just in the construction industry but also amongst the property agents and lawyers advising and negotiating the heads of terms in the first place.

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