

'There is a need to recognise ventilation as an industry in itself'

VENTILATION IS A SUBJECT ON ITS OWN, SAY BRUNO LACROIX AND GAETAN PIERREFEU OF ALDES, IN THIS INTERVIEW WITH CLIMATE CONTROL MIDDLE EAST

Apart from downturn-related factors, what challenges does the ventilation industry face in this region?

Outside of the downturn, the challenge that the ventilation industry faces is the overall lack of awareness about the purpose of the ventilation industry, and about the importance of indoor air quality.

The construction industry needs to recognise ventilation as an industry in itself, separate from the air conditioning industry. Consultants think of the two as part of the same industry, but they are not! Air conditioning is to cool; ventilation is to ventilate. Ventilation is a subject on its own. The importance of indoor air quality is a real concern.

Evian water has a tag line in its advertisement that says, "The water you drink is as important as the air you breathe," but we would like to reverse this statement in the case of ventilation and say: "The air you breathe is as important as the water you drink." People are so careful, for example, about the water their children drink. They boil it or install water filters. But what about the air they are breathing in their rooms all the time? They need to realise how important the quality of air in their rooms is.

American ALDES recently announced Ventzone IAQ – the company's new technology that makes it possible to turn a whole house IAQ system into a central bathroom ventilation system and vice versa. Is the Ventzone IAQ system a feasible option for this region?

Unfortunately, the market here is not ready for this product, as yet. This product needs a perfect level of construction. It is not feasible in the GCC, or even China, for example, as yet. It needs to be used in a high-level quality of development. It could be introduced at a later date for the new green buildings to be built, but for now, the market is not ready for such a product. There are many other different solutions. The solutions for each respective market are according to the needs of the consultants for buildings in that market.

What do you see as different in terms of green building goals, when you compare the UAE with other parts of the world?

The difference between here and Europe, for example, is in the building habits. The way things have worked here in the past is for a building to have an average life of, say, 20 years or so. The habit is to destroy and make a new

PRODUCTS THAT MEET ONE STANDARD USUALLY WILL MEET THE OTHER, AS WELL. HOWEVER, IN TERMS OF EFFICIENCY, IF YOU WANT TO SET TARGETS FOR NEW BUILDINGS, THERE NEEDS TO BE A COMMON PLATFORM TO COMPARE THEM.

one in the same place, every 20 years or so. On the other hand, in Europe, we preserve old structures and focus efforts towards renewing them.

How is ventilation related to sustainability? How do your products contribute to a green building?

While there is much more 'green building-speak' in this region now, it is important to understand that there are two parts or aspects to consider when discussing green building: the first is a 'Greener' way to build a building, and the second is to build a 'low-energy-consumption building'. What we do helps get the second part – that is, products that are used to build low-energy-consumption buildings.

A low-energy-consumption building is one with good insulation that ensures a tight envelope. There, we see a need for our ventilation products, to make sure that the quality of air within the building envelope – the indoor air quality – is maintained and improved.

IAQ is of a lower quality than the outdoor air, owing to the pollutants inside (through the products we use, cooking and so forth). Other than when it is a dusty, windy day in this region, generally, the



outdoor air is of a higher quality, overall. Therefore, creating good indoor air quality is a critical factor for the indoor environment of a sustainable building.

However, ventilation systems, to maintain high-levels of IAQ, consume energy. But our ventilation devices are designed for low-energy consumption, and thus contribute towards making a building green, as well as maintain good IAQ levels.

How aware is this market of the importance of good ventilation? Is it perceived as being a contributor to a green building?

Green Building, unlike in Europe, is still a relatively new concept in the region. The importance of energy conservation became important to the construction industry when they realised how expensive energy was here, especially when the oil prices shot up last summer to almost \$150 a barrel. Moreover, with projects getting delayed, due to lack of power, it became an even more crucial issue. With huge power consumption, due to air conditioning requirements, looking for more efficient solutions became imperative. The realisation occurred that it was better to implement energy-efficient ventilation systems to conserve power used for indoor air comfort, and use that power for manufacturing, instead.

Buildings in the UAE are designed according to various standards; some consultants design following the European standards, while others use American, or Australian standards. Do you see the availability of choice in the matter as a positive or a negative factor? In your opinion, does this affect the quality of construction

or that of the products specified?

Products that meet one standard usually will meet the other, as well. However, in terms of efficiency, if you want to set targets for new buildings, there needs to be a common platform to compare them. To do so, there needs to be one set level of regulation. However, this is only possible when there is involvement at the federal level. A green building code needs to be enforced by federal authorities, and we believe that there is strong political will for this to take place in the UAE; it is only a matter of time. MASDAR and Estidama are already making progress on this front.

What strategies are you employing to differentiate yourself in the current market situation?

We believe that value addition is a key element to help us differentiate ourselves in crisis and otherwise, as well. Customers like dealing with us because of the added value in terms of assisting them with designing solutions. We provide good service, not just for products, but also in terms of solutions. We do not like to refer to ourselves as 'product manufacturers'; we are solution providers.

In current times, some companies believe downsizing is the solution, while others see it as the time to expand.

What strategy is ALDES employing? When do you see the market beginning to make a comeback?

We see now as a good time to invest, despite the current situation. However, our plans to invest stood prior to the crisis, as well. We had already decided to invest in a new factory, owing to the growth of the company. We believe there will still be growth in the coming years, but not at the same level, of course. As

far as a market comeback is concerned, forecasts say that the world economy will restart next year.

With fewer project opportunities in Dubai now, do you see companies moving operations to other GCC entities? Which are the next major markets, in terms of potential?

Dubai is a city of quick service and delivery. It is a good and simple hub to operate from. However, because it had become so expensive, in some cases, companies had no choice. However, now it is a good sign, as prices stabilise and people can continue to operate from here.

Dubai was most affected simply because of speculation. Owners were buying for investment, not to occupy the properties, and so prices sky-rocketed. Now while things have slowed down, it is actually good for things to stabilise. People will continue to operate from here.

Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Bahrain seem to offer the most potential in terms of construction activity. They are developing slower, but now more development is in terms of preserving a sustainable economy.

How do you view Abu Dhabi, in particular?

Abu Dhabi has chosen a more long-term building approach. Unlike Dubai, they are not building for a speculative market. Their plans revolve around sustainable development and incorporate gradual growth, timely supply of units and an overall uniformity of landscape. For example, if you look at an aerial-view map of Abu Dhabi, even the height of the buildings is consistent and decreases uniformly from the centre of the city to the outskirts.

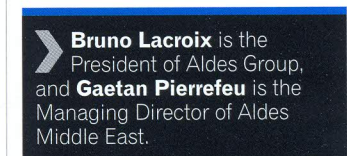
Do you anticipate a market for maintenance and

renovation in the UAE?

We do see a small market for maintenance and renovation; however at this point, the market is bigger in Abu Dhabi. But there will be a need for sure, especially as owners and users are now becoming more concerned. Once all the new construction is occupied, the market for maintenance has to grow. Perceptions will change, because Dubai was an industry-driven speculative market, but now with the house sales, running costs will be a key topic of discussion. End-users will consider comfort which will make maintenance very important.

What markets are you channelling your sales efforts towards in this period of crisis?

Our focus is to increase activity in four main markets: China, USA, Indian Ocean countries and the Emirates. We see significant potential in these markets. In addition to a growing awareness of environmental concerns, the ever-increasing energy costs present a huge need for solutions to reduce energy consumption and increase energy efficiency. These countries are now paying much more attention to low-energy-consumption practices. The need originated in Europe but has now expanded to other regions, as new regulations are put into practice. While the US market has not been very large, we now see this changing, thanks to US President Obama. China, too, has realised the importance of reducing energy consumption; earlier, they were building new power plants almost every year. ■

 Bruno Lacroix is the President of Aldes Group, and Gaetan Pierrefeu is the Managing Director of Aldes Middle East.