Government incentives bring few buildings with environmental features

BY RALPH JENNINGS
REUTERS

Government incentives bring few buildings with environmental features. Taipei 101, the world's tallest green design in Asia, a region with the world's busiest construction sector yet one of the poorest records for environmentally friendly construction.

The government's efforts, as well as demand from foreign companies for green office space, has spurred several high-profile projects that may kindle interest in low-energy buildings across the region.

China is said to be building half of the world's new floor space, but the vast majority of these new projects will be energy guzzlers. Environmentalists say they worry that these buildings will produce high carbon emissions for decades to come.

Beijing and other governments in the region are trying to encourage green construction, but Asia lags behind Europe, which has a 2012 deadline for all new buildings to produce the same amount of energy they consume.

Office buildings use at least 20 percent of an average country's total energy consumption and produce a similar proportion of their greenhouse gas emissions. "Developers are holding back on green buildings," said Tan Loke Man, head of the Malaysian Architects Association. "This will be the case as more and more companies become more environmentally concerned."

In China, 80 percent of the nearly one billion square meters, or 10.7 billion square feet, of buildings constructed every year are high-energy buildings that consume two to three times as much energy per unit of floor space as buildings in developed countries, according to a report by the Asia Business Council, which monitors green construction.

China aims to reduce energy use by 60 percent in new buildings, offering tax rebates as incentives. "China needs to do more," Janet Pau, head of the Asia Business Council. "They need a more coordinated building policy."

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The Shanghag Tower, in the mainland's commercial capital, will minimize wind resistance and energy consumption when it is completed in 2010 at a cost of $2.2 billion. The building will house 54 wind turbines to power heating and air conditioning, along with a rainwater collection system.

China has 166 projects registered by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED. By contrast, India has LEED certificates for 51 building projects and South Korea has 16.

LEED criteria include bike storage, low-water landscaping, recycled construction materials and waste reduction. Other energy efficiency measures include improvements like window insulation. Windows are the greatest sources of heat loss and air leakage, accounting for 11 percent of total losses of energy in buildings.

The message is seeping in, helped by corporate responsibility programs and government aid.

Chinatrust Bank of Taiwan broke ground this year on an environmentally friendly headquarters to Taipei that will cost $1 billion Taiwan dollar, or $400 million. Of that, 852 million dollars is going to eco-friendly features.

The complex, due to open in 2011, will include low-power air conditioning, site selection designed to reduce car trips and a layout that is 52 percent open space with a public park, said Thomas Chen, Chinatrust's secretary general. Chinatrust will offset the costs of making the complex green in three to four years and rent out a third of the space, likely to multinational.

"As far as I know, no space in Taiwan is as green as this one will be," Mr. Chen said.

The Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore offers incentives of up to about $4 per square meter for new energy-efficient buildings, as well as hopes to win multinational leases.

"Once a government gives more incentives, things get done," said Kondew Leung, a managing director with Savills Property Management in Hong Kong. "Green building is a trend but not a must. It takes time to make it a habit."