

BUILDING A STRONGER

CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

*Sound insulation, natural lighting and thermal comfort are just some aspects of a building not taken into consideration in the evaluation of a property. Perit Charles Buhagiar tells **Veronica Stivala** of the Building Industry Consultative Council's plans to draw up a comfort index for buildings*



Photo: Jamie Iain Genovese

Many of us are familiar with properties, both bought and rented, which have allowed us to listen in to more than we want to of our neighbours' antics and activities. The level of sound insulation in a property is currently not taken into account in its evaluation. The same can be said for other factors such as energy efficiency. These are issues that Perit Charles Buhagiar is working on in his capacity as executive chairman of the Building Industry Consultative Council.

Buhagiar explains how buildings are at the moment evaluated according to type, size, location and finish.

"However, there are other factors which we, as BICC, think should be included in this list," he says.

Buhagiar adds natural ventilation and lighting, sick home syndrome – which is when occupants become sick as a result of time spent in a specific building – and thermal comfort. These will all feature in a comfort index for buildings that is being drawn up.

Upping standards is the BICC's encouraging approach to the local construction industry. The BICC is essentially an advisory council made up of all stakeholders involved in the construction sector. This includes the operators, such

as real estate agents, developers, Chamber of Commerce and the general retailers and traders, as well as organisations from the public sector like the Housing Authority, the Lands Department, architects and engineers, and educational institutions such as the University of Malta and MCAST. Added to the list are financial institutions, regulators and workers' representatives.

So together with all these stakeholders, the council strives to keep its ear to the ground, and ceiling, of Malta's construction industry.

"The BICC's aim is to provide a forum where issues concerning building are discussed and



where solutions can be proposed," explains Buhagiar. The council then takes these issues to the government, which it also advises and assists in its implementation of EU legislation and directives."

Current goals are meeting the 2020 energy targets. The BICC's mission, Buhagiar continues, is to monitor the building industry and to advise policy makers on ways to enhance it as a strong social and economic contributor to improve sustainable development.

The BICC's responsibilities are manifold, which is why it subdivides into five working groups: Building Regulations and EU Directives, Regeneration of Property, the

Property Market, Research and Innovation, and Education and Training.

One of the current projects the working groups are working on is addressing the problem of people not going into the construction industry. How so?

"People are not aware of the opportunities available in the construction industry," notes Buhagiar. "There are 107 different skills but people do not know this and simply think that construction is a sort of skill or trade that gets you dirty and hurt. It can be a well-remunerated job too, of course," he comments.

This is resulting in a lacuna in trained local resources, leading to the need to import certain professionals. The industry is unregulated and is often causing unfair competition to locals, undercutting those who are really good. In order to address this issue, the BICC is investing in a skill cards initiative. These cards are meant to give formal recognition to those who are good at what they do but got their training informally, for instance, through apprenticeship.

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"The idea is to give them pride in their work, to give them something to show for it," Buhagiar explains.

The skill card helps people on the other side of the fence too, naturally, and helps employers find the workers they need, say a decorator, through a more professional system, rather than through recommendation alone.

"This helps prevent work being done badly, gives comfort to clients, leads to instilling pride in workers and makes for a more serious industry," Buhagiar adds.

The skill card initiative is being received well by stakeholders. It is a Budget measure and will be implemented by the end of this year. The BICC will be entrusted with issuing these skill cards, in collaboration with MCAST and the Employment and Training Corporation and will also require the completion of a health and safety awareness course; construction is sadly one of the largest contributors to onsite accidents at work.

The project will be piloted with four skills: decorators, tile layers, plumbers and electricians, and will then be extended to the

rest of the industry. The transition period will be five years with the hope that after seven years there will be cards for all skills.

Another initiative the BICC is working on is the creation of an online directory for green services and products in construction.

"The idea is to promote an environmentally friendly industry and to make it more environmentally sustainable," Buhagiar explains.

The website will feature a list of products (such as PV panels) as well as services and a list of those who can advise on the technologies available, such as installers and professionals who can offer the best solution to your problem.

The BICC, together with the National Statistics Office and the Ministry of Finance, is also investing its energies on drawing up a property price index. This will be used to measure inflation and property prices. Currently studies are carried out by separate organisations whose results do not tally, notes Buhagiar. The property price index will thus ensure a flat rate, helping banks in the allotting of mortgages and the way properties are evaluated. The BICC has started working with residential property as commercial waters get difficult and complicated.

We also discuss the BICC's work on regenerating vacant properties. Buhagiar starts by underlining that NSO statistics stating that there are 70,000 vacant properties are incorrect. The BICC actually visited the locations where some of these vacant properties are and discovered inaccuracies, such as garages being listed as separate properties. A more realistic figure is 30,000.

Buhagiar attributes the reason for this still high figure to issues such as inheritance where the price decided is not realistic and thus halts the selling of the property. Other factors include litigation between inheritors as well as the conditions of property which does not make it easy to sell. The BICC is trying to come up with proposals in time for next year's budget. When asked what these will be, Buhagiar says these have not been decided upon yet but may consist of financial incentives such as the first time buyer's scheme (government removed the 3.5 per cent stamp duty on the first €150,000 of the value of a property) which helped in this too.

As our conversation draws to an end, the numerous issues that need to be addressed are clearer. Yet the burning question has to be asked: Why does Malta not have a minister responsible for construction? A difficult question to answer for Buhagiar who himself filled this role in the 1990s.

"Our remit is so far-reaching precisely because we do not have a politician responsible for construction," he points out, adding how the building industry contributes a huge 9.3 per cent to Malta's GDP. "The BICC is trying to give this industry some direction," comments Buhagiar. **■**