

Greenwashing: Time to air construction's dirty green laundry

As the risks associated with climate change become more apparent and customers have greater expectations from building developers and owners, more companies are marketing themselves as being committed to the environment. However, not all of them are as 'green' as they like to declare, says Databuild CEO Morag Evans.



Source: Supplied

“Heightened awareness around the devastating impacts of climate change on the environment has increased the demand for green building practices in the construction industry. Buzz words such as ‘net zero’, ‘environmentally friendly’, ‘decarbonisation’, and ‘reduced footprint’ make frequent appearances in companies’ marketing campaigns, but many of their claims are nothing more than greenwashing – a deliberate intent to provide misleading, unsubstantiated or, in some instances, even completely false information around the environmental benefits of the products and services they offer.

“As a result, architects and specifiers are unable to make informed decisions about the products they wish to specify in a project, and risk being duped into believing that their choices are beneficial to the environment when in reality nothing could be further from the truth.”



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Tom Walker 16 Sep 2022



Failure to deliver on green promises

It doesn't end there, Evans adds. "Making all sorts of green promises in the design phase of a project but failing to deliver during its construction is not uncommon, especially if the specified eco-friendly product is difficult to procure. Rather than delay the project until the product becomes available, contractors install a non-green counterpart – and get away with it, primarily because South Africa currently has no appropriate legislation in place to hold the companies responsible for these disingenuous practices to account.

"It will take years after the project's completion before the impact of these actions is ultimately revealed, but by then it will be too late to undo the damage done."

Exposing the guilty

All construction participants, along with specialist bodies and authorities, have a responsibility to expose those guilty of greenwashing, Evans asserts.

"Whether it's a manufacturer or supplier falsely marketing a so-called green product, or a contractor claiming to be sustainable when it is not, these claims should not be taken at face value but rather rigorously scrutinised to determine their legitimacy."

She advocates the appointment of independent consultants on construction projects who possess the relevant expertise to wade through the marketing hype and validate green claims.

Project owners can also protect themselves by including clauses in their contracts that ensure green requirements are not only specified, but also enforced. The contract then also serves an effective monitoring tool to ensure that authentic products and practices are procured and implemented.



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Vulnerable to green fatigue

"Greenwashing undermines the industry's pledge to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 – as part of the international Paris Agreement on climate change – by treating sustainability as a passing fad and not a long-term commitment.

"If such practices are allowed to continue, it won't be long before our commitment to preserving the planet begins to wane and green fatigue sets in. The construction industry is obligated to do its part to safeguard the environment, but it must do so honourably and ethically," Evans concludes.

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