

My green hotel

IBPC sets the stage for an extraordinary paradigm shift in hospitality and office spaces

Paris (Fr) 27/07/2022: Following this year's recent MIPIM conference in Cannes, whose theme was "Driving Urban Change", IBPC – the organisation dedicated to the transformation of urban spaces for the betterment of mankind and the environment – has released a "deep dive" into how hotel and office spaces are being revolutionised in this manner.

In the MIPIM conference session (in March 2022), "Hospitality & commercial real estate: How nature trends hospitality & amenity issues", a group of panellists from a broad range of backgrounds looked at how to take into account biodiversity and the relationship between humans and nature in living spaces for the benefit of all concerned.

Guests included: Neil Jacobs, CEO of Six Senses (speaking remotely from Singapore); Clémence Bechu, Director of Development and Innovation, Bechu & Associates; Michel Gicquel, Architect – Former Design Director, Accor Group, Founder of Global Concept, Hana Narvaez, Director, Stefano Boeri Architetti, Olivia Conil Lacoste, CSR Director, Bouygues Immobilier, and Duncan Lewis, Architect founder, Duncan Lewis Scape Architecture. The session was hosted by the Australian journalist and presenter Richard Barnes, internationally renowned in the hospitality field.

Six Senses is already distinguished for its commitment to sustainability, winning the 2021 Travel + Leisure Global Awards for its dedication to sustainability, conservation, and ethical environmental practices.

"The company is almost 30 years old and was taking sustainability seriously long before most people knew of the word," explained Jacobs. "Right from the beginning through to today, we grow a lot of our own food, and all resorts have organic gardens. Even some of the urban properties that we are working on at the moment have organic gardens in one form or another, perhaps more vertical than horizontal. But that's always been our greater intention - to bring the green inside."

"The science proves the benefits of bringing landscape or biophilic design into interior spaces too, and the impact that has on our health, on breathing, and all aspects of wellness. So that also plays a huge part in our design process."

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“We are probably the only hospitality company that I'm aware of that has dedicated sustainability teams on each property plus a full-time corporate permaculture specialist – highly qualified in agriculture and farming – who moves from property to property and assists local management in the growing stuff that makes its way into our interiors, our spa products and kitchens.

Jacobs says that even though most of Six Senses resorts are located outside of the city, when it comes to biodiversity, a hotel is a kind of a mini-town in itself. In other words, a resort is perhaps a great case study for how towns should work. Six Senses Zighy Bay in Oman has its own farm producing goat's cheese, eggs, and camel's milk, and bees have been introduced to provide local honey for guests. Like all properties, it bottles its own still and sparkling drinking water.

Of course, says Jacobs, it's a little easier to do these things in a resort than perhaps it is in an urban environment where generally it is necessary to 'go vertical': “For example, our New York property is crowned by a large rooftop. The developers said to me, “We assume that you want to put a pool on the rooftop overlooking the Hudson and New York skyline. But we said, no, actually, we don't. What we'd like to do is just some urban farming and hydroponics so that we can go upward as well. And hence we will be growing some of the food, the herbs, and the botanicals that we need for the restaurant and bar. Our shared areas and guestrooms will also be alive with plants, you'll feel the difference in the air quality.

“It's very important to us that we can bring a curated approach to landscaping and bring it inside. We do green walls. It's an obvious way to go in an urban environment. And we're looking at that in several places. The approach, wherever we go urban, is to get as much outdoor space as we can, which is sometimes is difficult. We're also opening in Lisbon, where we have big gardens and lots of opportunities to grow our own stuff and use it within the hotel.

“For us, it's a critical component of who we are, and a critical expression of our company values.”

The Six Senses CEO says while the hotel industry is not renowned for sustainable activity, hopefully, that's changing, because guests are demanding it today: “They want to be in healthier environments, and a hotel group that can provide that will draw market share in a different way. But not only are guests demanding it, but employees are also demanding it, among a wider scope of sustainable practices.”

“It doesn't happen overnight,” concluded Jacobs, adding, “We always take a view that the small steps are the important steps, and if you can do little things one at a time,

everything makes a difference. We can't change the world overnight in our industry, but we can certainly start to go down that road in a more meaningful way.”

Michel Gicquel agrees that it is useful to use the hotel as a “city in miniature”, as a model for good practices: “We find all the approaches, the functions, the accommodation, the conviviality with the sharing areas, the work with the meeting or conference rooms, the common spaces, and so on. There are two areas that are important to us: there is the refurb, and there is the new construction. Of course, when you start a project from scratch, you can dream. We often have a little more freedom and fewer constraints than in a refurb or renovation. That is very important. On a blank sheet of paper, it is a little easier to have the concepts of tomorrow. And that’s where I think we have a fundamental role to play right now. It’s in emerging countries.

“These are zones where I am working a great deal, with governments and others, to ensure that the projects of tomorrow, whatever they may be in all fields, integrate all these elements, both in the city and in resorts. It’s the right approach, and we can do it. I would say that at least 60% of the countries in the world have this approach. So, there are still many, many projects to be carried out.

“And then, of course, there are the rehabilitation projects, and the introduction of nature in existing buildings is very complex. It doesn’t mean one should throw in the towel. By the same token, the environment and sustainability are fundamental. When we speak of nature, I think the real battle is on all fronts. This is only one of the essential elements for well-being, but there are many, many others that should be highlighted. One of the old battles that I continue with is the restructuring of spaces, the optimisation of spaces and especially the adaptation of spaces to what we have understood for quite some time, that is to say, to our biorhythms. What does that mean? It means that according to one’s moods, according to the moments of one’s life, the spaces are not ‘lived’ in the same way. This means that we will move from a habitat which was the traditional habitat of the industrial era to a new kind of habitat. And this is a transition that will last for decades, which is a flexible and modular habitat in which we find all of this.

“This point is essential because it will make it possible to optimise the spaces, thus automatically to augment our control of the energies and all the rest. And in addition, and moreover, it will not be a frustration because it will generate a sense of well-being. It will allow the person, according to his or her rhythms and moments, to appropriate it perfectly. So, to come back to hospitality, this is what we have been trying to do for a very long time, the modification of space and the interaction of spaces according to the moments of the day, it changes. And then, depending on the position of the hotel, in life or elsewhere, it’s how we immediately and naturally integrate the populations. It’s not a closed place. It is not the closed-in area that we knew 30 or 40 years ago; it is an open place of sharing... open to all forms of events and meetings. This is becoming more and more true. This is exactly what Neil Jacobs was explaining. It’s an extraordinary

playground. I'm quite familiar with the Six Senses projects, and obviously they are big successes. And as he also explained very honestly, the new 'playgrounds' in the city are much more difficult. But in any case, that doesn't mean it's impossible."

"Nature can bring pleasure of course, because it is nice, and beautiful. Nature can help to create social links," explains Clémence Bechu. "Nature can have other active properties such as agriculture to help the objective of the cities to have a nutritive aspect. Nature also has climate benefits. A lot of us are living in cities, and we know how it's difficult to deal with the heat islands, for example, and when you 'vegetalise' the cities, you can benefit from the fresh islands, etcetera.

"But we also think that there is a lot of work to do also to better reconnect homo sapiens with the nature, by watching, observing and understanding how nature works, because homo sapiens are only 300,000 years old, but nature is of 3.8 billion years old. It's the best engineering that have always existed, and nature has always been able to adapt to climate change. We know that by 2050, 70% of the population will live in cities. And so the city is the new 'shell' of homo sapiens, but cities have not been constructed to be able to fight and adapt themselves regarding climate change. That's why we work a lot also to conceive projects that do more than integrate nature inside of them. We work to integrate our projects in the cycles of the nature. We call this approach biomimicry."

Hana Narvaez followed on: "We design architecture, but from a different point of view. We integrate living nature in architecture, designing buildings for trees, where also humans can live. So, we don't have one tenant in our mind, we have two: we have the trees and then we have people who are going to living there."

So how does that transform into business? "Nowadays we are much more aware of the need of being 'fine' and enjoying wellness. We need that to live better. At the same time, we have all developed a new attention towards the climate change issue and the environmental crisis we are facing. That's why the relation with green, open spaces and nature is increasingly asked for. As long as you provide that and as long as you are able to actually tackle that need, you will have the result.

"We are seeking to find answers, different answers to new questions. This perspective is very challenging from the architectural point of view, because that means that you need to transform your business, to re-think it in another way, more and more every day. Seeking how to integrate living nature into architecture, we try to look at cities as a landscape, as an ecosystem. In our buildings or our urban planning projects, we try to build within that ecosystem in order to actually improve it, nurture it, or even boost it. So that the cities, as well the apartments or the hotels inside, can actually be part of something alive.

“From a very pragmatic point of view, green provide for several environmental benefits: for instance, it allows to save energy thanks to the shading effect of trees which provide an important reduction in air conditioning. If you see it from an urban-scale approach, you have a place where people want to go back to. You will have a city where people are less willing to move to the countryside just because maybe they can have here the nature that they need, and they start to feel better within the city. In this way, you can actually think of increasing density and reducing soil consumption.

“For instance, the Bosco Verticale in Milan is a landmark, but it also creates an opportunity for the city to actually attract new inhabitants, as well as more tourists. While doing that, it is also improving the quality of the air.

“As long as we can improve our cities, we can actually act positively in the climate change scenario, since our cities are one of the main causes of the environmental crisis. Therefore, they can become one of the main opportunities we actually have.”

Duncan Lewis stated that a key issue stems from the fact that people have been completely disconnected from the environment: “The problem of the cities of yesterday have got to stop. Human beings have a tendency to separate things, to categorise things rather than to mix things. And I think the problem in the world today is that we build buildings and we build parks beside buildings, but we haven't brought them together.”

“I prefer to build ugly projects rather than building forms which have no sense and which are actually going against the grain of what we should be doing in environment for tomorrow”, said Lewis. “Nature always managed to infiltrate architecture. It’s all about back and forth between what is true and false, opaque, and legible, hidden and obvious. Nature is neither an ideologic nor aesthetic alibi that dresses up architecture. Modernity has split mankind from his surroundings. It’s necessary to recreate the links between man and his environment, where time is never frozen, where we make way for our dreams. The relation between architecture and the city will give way to a new relation between architecture and nature: excessive urbanization of the greater part of the territory has become a vital issue and what is at stake is important; A new urban culture must be given the chance in which a new nature and human density are developed conjointly so that they responded to real human needs and values. Working within that framework architecture could minimize its imposing presence and finally think about its new relationship, and approximation to its environment.”

As nature need time to grow, Lewis said that time is “a very important material in architecture”, adding that unfortunately it's been abandoned as well.

“Working with the environment helps us to work with the notion of time. Buildings which change colour, build new buildings which have as a seasonal approach to is very, very

important. It's not just about thinking about the planet environment, but it's our place within that environment. That's what's important for the cities of tomorrow.”

Olivia Conil Lacoste underlines the fact that “very simple things are very important, too”.

“We make places where people live, people work, people get together”, stated Ms Lacoste, explaining that the current slogan of Bouyges Immobilier is “Life begins here”.

“It's very sincere in the way that we want to put life in our strategy. That means two things for me - to be the head of the users, because if the places are to become lively, you have to design that with the users. That's the first thing. And the second one is that we can't design places and do our work if life stops here. So, we have to take care about the planet, nature, and us... and we have a strong belief at Bouyges Immobilier that the fight against global warming won't be won without taking care of biodiversity. The two topics are very closely linked.

“We have been working on the subject of nature and biodiversity with a lot of energy for a number of months. How did we do that? Firstly, we developed the Biodiversity certification. For seven years now, in different programmes we have around 20 certifications or are trying to get to 20 projects. We had a silver medal last year of the Biodiversity certification. But we want to pay specific attention of nature and biodiversity in every project, even the little ones. To do that, it's not too simple, but you have to give the teams very simple things to do. You have to change the way they look at their own projects. There are three things we try to do on every project. There are three things we try to do for every project. First, work with an ecologist. It's very important that we have the point of view of an ecologist of the initial site, and on the project, we want to do. So, the landscape, it's also the ecologist. The second thing we do with every project is that we develop a biodiversity calculator on the surface - the square metres... to maximise it - do more vegetable, more permeable surface, limiting the waterproofing, per square metre.

“All our teams now have to score the project and try to maximize more space for nature. More space for nature, even in town is not always very simple, but which kind of nature? Is it decorative nature, beautiful nature, but objects? Or is it nature which is alive? We try to develop some simple rules to make our gardens or outside spaces very lively, welcoming for biodiversity. And we try to give some guidelines to all of our teams. It's very symptomatic, for example at Bouyges Immobilier, when we begin to work on that subject: what is the budget of the green spaces? They didn't know. It was that they didn't think about the budget we should put on the green spaces of the project. It's an oversight; we don't think about it. And even now, people really ask about nature and having nature on the project and we take care about it, it's been revealed that we really have to change our mind about the subject. So why we do that? Because we think that nature makes a town 'desirable'. And if we don't want to 'artificialize', we have to bring nature into the town; and that brings wellness, health, social bonds... we all know that.

“The difficulty now is we think it gives value to the buildings, maybe. I think also we give acceptability to the act of building, because it's very difficult right now to build in France. It's difficult, because there is a lot of wariness about the builder, so it's difficult to build. Including nature in a project means developing acceptability and developing business, because it makes our project desirable, but I don't know to what point. I think the difference between biodiversity and climate is that you can gain euros with low carbon, but we don't know how to measure the value of nature on the project. We are trying to work with different actors of the build to give a value because if we can give value, investors will give value and it would be more valuable.”

Ms Lacoste, as an administrator of IBPC, explains how the France-based international organisation works.

“IBPC is a meeting place for a new sector integrating biodiversity, urban planning and real estate. The association aims to gather the support of all forward-thinking actors within the urban space, real estate and all those living in an urban environment. Today, it has 85 members, including four architectural firms, major French corporate groups like Groupe Caisse des Dépôts (French Bank of Deposit), Gecina, Eiffage, Bouygues, Vinci, Altea Cogedim, LPO (Blue bird Network), some international non-French groups and the city of Paris.

“Its purpose is to promote urban biodiversity and the relationship between man and nature in the fields of town planning, construction and everyday life within built-up urban areas.

“Biophilia* plays a major role in the quality of life of urban dwellers. IBPC's awareness-raising activities thus target both professionals and the general public.

“The BiodiverCity® certifications, of which IBPC has been the initiator, are the principal tools in the service of a strong objective: to create living spaces and areas that are exemplary in economic, socio-cultural and functional terms. At the neighbourhood level, this contributes to creating and building a city that is benevolent and resilient.

“The BiodiverCity® certifications serve a strong objective: to create places and living spaces welcoming nature and life that are exemplary in economic, socio-cultural and functional terms. At the neighbourhood level, this contributes to inventing and building a benevolent and resilient city.

“To date, nearly 350 development projects, buildings or districts, are committed in the implementation of a BiodiverCity® certification process; 150 of them have been certified in construction/refurbishment. These include the musical city of Ile Seguin in Paris, an eco-district near Geneva in Switzerland, another in Warsaw, a warehouse on 5 levels in Singapore, an office tower in Milan, and a hotel complex in Cuba. Beyond the committed projects, more than a hundred others are already under study.

“Deloitte and Certivea are the official “auditor” organisations for BiodiverCity® certification applications.”

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** According the Encyclopaedia Britannica: biophilia hypothesis, idea that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. The term biophilia was used by German-born American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1973), which described biophilia as “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive.”*

