Book review

CLOSING THE LOOP: BENCHMARKS FOR SUSTAINABLE BUILDINGS

Sue Roaf. RIBA Enterprises, 2003. ISBN 1 85946 118 2, £29.95, 384 pp.

When I finished reading Sue Roaf's 'Closing the Loop' I found myself remembering when I once bought a toolbox for a bargain price at an auction. Looking for a Phillips screwdriver in my new treasure trove, I found a quite incredible adjustable spanner. It is much the same with Roaf's book. What other book on sustainable development would give you the data to compute its own eco-footprint (I make it about 30 m²!)? But where in the box was the crowbar you needed to take on the value engineer?

Roaf's principal thesis is that sustainable buildings only have meaning in terms of outcomes not inputs. It is the necessity of feedback of outcomes to later designs that gives the book its title and rationale. Only in building construction has it been thought acceptable by the industry to take no great interest in how the building actually performs, so she has a real point. Indeed there is a good final section on post-occupancy evaluation written by Andrew Leaman that gives the flavour of the argument. You might not have guessed from the trade press reviews that the De Montford low-energy building turns out to have been less than spectacular. Leaman's case studies are from those clients enlightened enough to commission assessments. Some real wolves in green clothing are still out there. Roaf looks forward with relish to the arrival of the Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations when many of the greenwash buildings of the 1990s will get exposed.

A large part of the book is taken up with descriptions of performance indicators and this is clearly how Roaf sees development of structured feedback. Each chapter is designed as a freestanding tool, with very good reading lists. If you cannot find the size of tool you want, you are given the maker's name on the handle. That said some tools look undersized to me. For example, the chapter on life cycle assessments is not strong enough to untangle a 'wood's good, steel's no deal' specifier. On the other hand other tools look oversized. Photovoltaic panels get a chapter to themselves, which, to say the least, is uncritical, while there is nothing on, say, combined heat and power.

The book's origins are a lecture series that Sue Roaf initiated at the Royal Institute of British Architects with a wide range of speakers. She has done us a great service in assembling the material with their help into this large and useful toolbox. If like me you want a toolbox on your bookshelf, this book is well worth a look. But I still cannot find the crowbar. From the reported post-occupancy evaluations, something is going wrong between the client briefs discussed in early chapters and the building finally handed over to the client. This is presumably the management of the project, and the final High Noon with the quantity surveyor or value engineer when the thing is hopelessly over budget and environmental and social sustainable aspirations go under in order to keep the project economically viable. So I hope we can look forward to a successor volume all about 'tightening closed loops'!

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