

Ready Steady Greece: The race to build back greener

Seeking to address the challenges posed by climate change, the Greek government is looking to increase energy sustainability, improve the environmental credentials of its new and existing building stock, and strive to 'build back greener'.

Greece's Minister of the Environment and Energy Kostas Skrekas recently announced a new regulatory framework which will enable overseas investors to create clean and renewable energy systems across the country, while also encouraging local expertise and sustainable growth in the region.

Against this positive backdrop, Bennetts Associates and Buro Happold hosted an online roundtable with fellow industry experts, from Enterprise Greece and leading local developer Dimand, to examine the impact building back greener could have on the country, and how this might be achieved.

Kicking off the session, Bennetts Associates Director Julian Lipscombe said time is of the essence for addressing climate change. "It's a global problem that needs global solutions, and that requires the very best minds to come together. We've been pushing very hard on the subject of mainstream sustainability in the UK for more than 30 years, and we're keen to spread that knowledge globally."

Collaboration with local knowledge and expertise is absolutely essential, Julian said, to ensure that solutions are relevant to each context and climate. While Greece is well placed to build back in a greener way, "it needs to do so quickly. We think there is a huge opportunity to do something profound, both with new build and the very significant challenge of tackling existing building stock".

Taking up Julian's point about urgency, Olga Itsiou, Technical Director at Greek property developer Dimand, noted that the country had recently experienced severe weather conditions. "We had a heatwave in July, we had extreme fires in the beginning of August and serious floods in recent weeks. This has shifted the focus onto sustainability issues. Greece also has a lot to offer in terms of existing building stock which needs retrofitting. There is a big opportunity there."

Georgios Filiopoulos, Chief Executive of Enterprise Greece, the country's national and investment and trade promotion agency, said that since at least half of Greece's residential buildings were more than 40 years old, and the pace of construction of new buildings is relatively low, building renovation will play a crucial role in the greening of construction as well as economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Upgrading the energy efficiency of all buildings is of immense importance for the country. Greece already has a long-term strategy in place that will help the country to bring about economic transformation and achieve broader sustainable development goals, as well as the targets that have been set by the Paris Agreement," he added.

Greece's national energy and climate plan was particularly ambitious, Georgios added, "and we hope that it will drastically reduce energy consumption".

What has impressed Bennetts Associates' Julian about working in Greece on the Importex scheme for Dimand in Athens, is the recognition of the challenge that needs to be faced, and the desire to get on with tackling it. But that recognition has to be translated into action. "Greece is an attractive location in which to invest, and given how competitive the world is becoming for investment that's clearly good news. But unless it can be demonstrated to investors that their funding is secure in assets which are future proof to deal with climate change, then the country will struggle to compete."

Kostis Lysikatos, a Director at engineering firm Buro Happold, said that in order to start thinking about how greener and more sustainable they want to be, including how to meet 2050 decarbonisation targets, everyone needs to step up a gear. "We have to start with our buildings and the behaviours in our buildings, and then broaden our vision. I split my time between Athens and London, and I have found that Greek engineers and architects are really open to sharing their knowledge with others, both at home and overseas. And while we're learning from local experts, we also have experience from overseas markets we've worked in, where perhaps the cause of sustainability has been advanced a little bit further."

Without investors who are aware of the issues around sustainability it will be almost impossible to make progress, suggested Dimand's Olga. "When we as developers have suggested to a client or an investor or a tenant to move towards being extra sustainable, they have taken it on board, which is great. By being very open about these things with relevant stakeholders, everything is possible."

Collaborating with stakeholders, including occupiers, is also crucial, Olga argued. "We set our targets very early, along with our stakeholders, keeping in mind that each decision we make affects the building's environmental footprint. We apply sustainability best practice to all of our projects, and we try to educate the tenants of every building that we build. It is important to raise this sort of awareness among the people involved, not just the people behind a project, but those people who spend time in these developments, their experience, their everyday life."

Design – and sustainable design at that, whether for new build or retrofitting purposes – will play a huge role and it will increasingly rely on more and better data, believes Buro Happold's Kostis. "We need to understand the building's systems, and how they're working, to read the data effectively and create buildings that will dynamically respond to the needs to the users. If we can provide support in the early stages of a design in collaboration with developers and end users, I believe the contribution to the 2050 target will be more achievable," he added.

Clearly there is considerable backing for Greece's environmental ambitions. Achieving the goals the country has set itself, will require collaboration, cooperation, ingenuity, and skill from within the country and beyond. If it can draw these attributes to its cause, then it stands a great chance of success.