

Improving building safety design across the GCC

Oscar Wendel, Campaign Manager for Safety Design in Buildings discusses how the organisation's conferences are helping to improve fire safety across the GCC

The Safety Design in Buildings conference campaign across the GCC was established in 2012 as an independent platform for construction professionals concerned with safety planning, execution, and maintenance. 38 conferences have taken place to date across the GCC as well as in Egypt and Iran.

What we hope to achieve whenever we enter a new country is to spearhead new regulations by having professionals shed light on the prevailing issues, and encouraging an open discussion between high-level professionals on how to best address these. That this also invariably fosters long-term business and professional relationships is a welcome offsprung in achieving this."

When it comes to construction, engineering, and architecture at large, fire-safety concerns are relevant to every project, whether to a larger or a lesser degree. Educating everyone in the industry continuously is the central role of the campaign, based on the formula of inviting leading experts to

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present their insights and thoughts about safety, and the audience asking questions pertinent to their daily roles and responsibilities. Therefore the campaign is predicated on exchanging technical know-how and facilitating networking among the different sectors of the construction industry.

We consult the industry, which comprises the professionals that influence fire-safety decisions, and determine what was the best mix to engage everyone and their disparate disciplines. By creating an independent, mutually-inclusive industry platform for experts, our aim is first and foremost education and awareness-raising, as opposed to simply selling or punting products and systems.

Comprising the leading experts in the field around the GCC, as well as enjoying a close relationship with civil defence, the campaign has therefore gained substantial credibility. The model was then replicated and rolled out across the GCC, as well as in Egypt, and now ultimately in Iran.

What the campaign does best is to highlight the value of high-quality products and systems, and how opting for the latest innovations and technology is the best-case business scenario possible. Another major attraction for sponsors is the opportunity to rub shoulders with industry experts and specialists in a professional setting that bolsters mutual communication and understanding. By nurturing such relationships, a network is fostered whereby everyone can call on each other for advice and expert assistance, which ultimately has a dramatic knock-on effect on building safety and quality in the industry.

And this is what the campaign is ultimately about: Creating a team from disparate professionals and stakeholders who share similar interests at the end of the day, but who would otherwise not have been introduced to each other, let alone met. This is what continues to differentiate SDiB as a campaign: It is the ongoing, continuous engagement with the industry at large, as opposed to separate, standalone events where presentations are duly delivered and business cards exchanged.

With a subject as important and complex as fire safety, it is clearly insufficient to deliver a strong message once only. What is critical is keeping this message front and centre at all times, in support of the main focus of an all-encompassing approach combining all disciplines, from the initial design through to the engineering and construction phase. This continuity creates the long-term impact we aim for, and makes it possible to build those meaningful long-term relationships that are so integral to the continued sustainability and viability of the industry.

It has been interesting to see the campaign develop over the years. Upon its introduction in 2012, many of the views and opinions espoused by fire-safety experts were either not understood nor accepted widely. Today these are often echoed and perceived as being mainstream. This speaks to the value of these campaigns. It is not about discovering or uncovering panaceas for fire safety in buildings in the form of new technology or alternative approaches to fire safety. It is about making the relevant information available.



That means highlighting the typical problems that can occur, and learning from each other about how best to solve these by sharing technical expert opinions and practical experience, and establishing a network of contacts to help each other out in the field.

SDiB has been hugely influential in this process of shedding light on what can go wrong, and how these issues can best be addressed. You could pull out the presentations that were made five years ago, and see how these were a glimpse into the future. Fire experts are a niche group of professionals. However, they can stand to benefit the industry in general if they can reach out to construction professionals more broadly. Everyone

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who attends our meetings will, at some point in their career, have had to deal with some form of safety regulation. However, the majority of our attendees are not fire-safety experts, and therefore appreciate the opportunity to understand how it affects their own sphere of influence. This also increases the awareness of, and appreciation for, the work of fire engineers in general, and the vital role they play, combined with the important role

that quality plays in terms of building materials.

Codes change consistently, just as markets evolve all the time. Therefore the SDiB plays an important role in providing an invaluable snapshot of the prevailing status quo. It is also a sounding board for testing new ideas and voicing concerns, and an opportunity to introduce new technologies and approaches to enhance building safety.

Doing the event in new markets is always very interesting for us when there are many learning opportunities for everyone on both sides. Fire safety regulations differ between markets in the Middle East, which is due partly to differences in architecture and planning of the built environment and infrastructure. This is where we are very pleased to be able to play a role in bringing industry professionals together across borders where there is much for everyone to explore and where some markets lag others, this is a good opportunity to learn from their mistakes.

Unfortunately, awareness comes with hindsight in the form of accidents. Every accident pushes the authorities to raise standards. Buildings are becoming more complex, and ensuring fire safety is a dynamic process whereby it is important that professionals are kept up-to-date, and that they communicate with each other.

SDiB remaining conferences for 2018 are taking place in Muscat and Dammam, finishing the year in Abu Dhabi on December 11 at Jumeirah at Etihad Towers.

Oscar Wendel, Campaign Manager - Safety Design in Buildings

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