

Let's talk about timber – and the future!

On Thursday 14 June, a half-day seminar dedicated to the challenges underlying the **fast-growing timber frame construction sector** was organised in Paris at the initiative of Artelia, an international consultancy, engineering and project management group.

The participants who gathered for the occasion were Laurent Bizeur (Nexity), Aurélie Blottière (Artelia), David Bruchon (Icade Promotion), Jérôme Duru (Artelia), Alain Flumian (Paris City Council), Pascal Gontier (architect), Karin Le Tyrant (AIDA), Jean Piveteau (PiveteauBois), François Suchard (Artelia) and Jean-Christophe Terrier (Vinci Construction France). They made the most of this opportunity to discuss the long-term trends related to the use of this material.

Specialists working together to drive technical prowess

Timber has been used for construction since time immemorial, but in the past thirty years it has benefitted from a series of technical breakthroughs that have led to it being increasingly used in high-rise buildings. From glue-laminated to cross-laminated timber, via increasingly high-tech prefabrication processes and solutions emerging in the field of soundproofing, the landscape of this leading-edge sector was thoroughly reviewed during the productive discussions between these experts.

This collaborative approach exemplifies the success of timber frame construction, according to Karin Le Tyrant: *“using timber involves taking soundproofing aspects into account right from the start of a project. We adopt working methods and establish partnerships with different laboratories that encourage discussions and help us acquire a good understanding of the constructional principles we must follow”*.

A relatively small investment compared to the overall cost?

Moreover, timber has many other advantages that make it a very strong contender in the sector, as Laurent Bizeur (Nexity) emphasised: *“Today, timber construction has a drawing power that makes up for any additional costs it may induce – assuming that there are any, which is not a given.”*

This issue obviously sparked a debate: for David Bruchon, *“If you want to create a building using only timber, you are going to be confronted with a mountain of regulations and standards. So you will have to innovate, but innovation is not free.”*

So, is timber more or less expensive than more traditional materials? *“The initial investment is an issue that can be raised, but it should be offset against the overall cost. Using timber to construct a building is more advantageous for the user over the building's complete life cycle”,* deemed Jean-Christophe Terrier (VINCI Construction France), who also pointed out: *“Maybe new financing methods should be invented to cater to this”*.

A sector that is still struggling to structure itself

Naturally, the debate also turned to the issue of the maturity of the sector. In a context where the French President stated, on 18 April, that *“timber is a sector that we must develop in France. We must therefore implement a proactive policy, working in collaboration with the industry”*, expectations in the construction sector could not be higher.

And even though Jean Piveteau stressed that the French timber industry is healthy, he did recognise that *“for engineering and construction products, the French sector is lagging behind. The Scandinavian countries, Germany and Austria are a step ahead. Intrinsicly, on the market for the timber used by our builders, we are lagging behind.”*

Can timber “decarbonise low-cost construction”?

In any case, the final users seem to have been won over by the advantages provided by timber. And with good reason because, as Pascal Gontier (architect) pointed out, *“Today, we are capable of creating structural grids that are completely open using timber. We can now consider making buildings that are more open and this, combined with the possibilities offered by prefabricated components, will allow us to propose custom-built homes that can be modified in the future.”*

According to David Bruchon (Icade Promotion), *“this trend is already significant in Greater Paris but, more importantly, it is really becoming a significant trend from the carbon emissions standpoint. Timber will continue being used in construction because of its numerous properties, in particular the fact that it offers the entire profession a means of reducing its carbon emissions at a low cost.”*

There is no doubting that timber is one of the key materials for low-carbon construction. Supported by favourable legislation in France, it is hence an efficient response to the low-carbon dynamics being pushed by the French government by means of the “BBCA” and “E+C” green building accreditations, which should become far more widespread as of 2020.

About Artelia:

Artelia is an international, multidisciplinary consultancy, engineering and project management group specialising in the sectors of building construction, infrastructure, water and the environment. With 4900 employees and turnover of €485m in 2017, Artelia is one of France’s leading groups in the sector. Internationally, the group has offices in more than 30 countries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Artelia is 97% owned by its managers and employees.

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