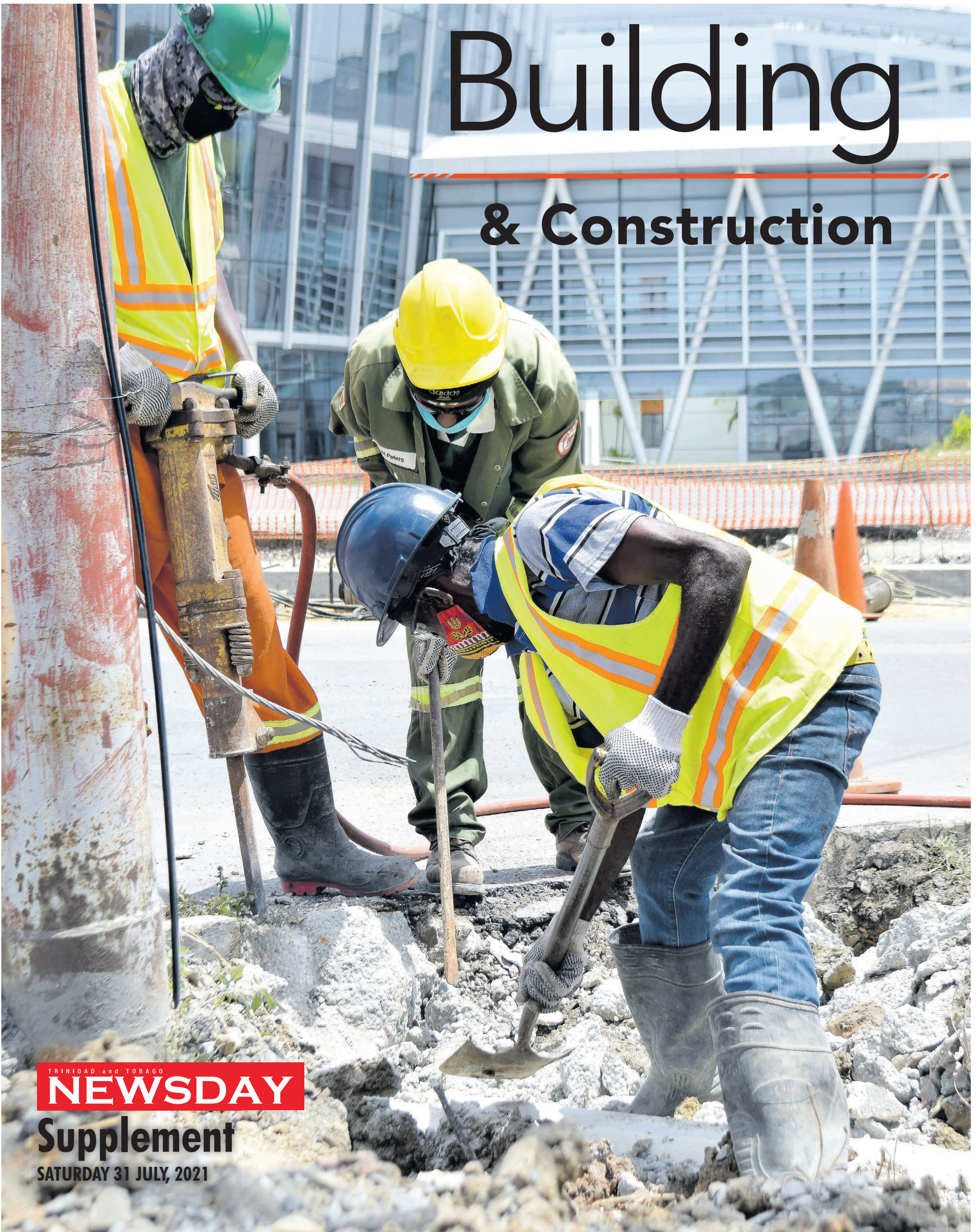


Building

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TRINIDAD and TOBAGO

NEWSDAY

Supplement

SATURDAY 31 JULY, 2021



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Many of the current issues in the local construction sector stem from a global shortage in the supply of building materials, particularly steel, the price of which has soared to unprecedented levels. PHOTO BY ANGELO MARCELLE

In this July 5 photo, construction work resumes on apartment complex, The View, at Fort George in St James. PHOTO BY SUREASH CHOLAI

To build or to buy?

The cost of owning a new home in 2021

ANDREW GIOANNETTI

Building a home from foundation to finish rather than purchasing one on the market has its obvious appeal. It gives the owner, capital provided, freedom to match it to a distinct taste.

But even if capital is not the prospective owner's primary factor

in making the decision, many others are being considered, far more now than ever.

Setting aside added bureaucracy associated with private sector construction, covid19 has disturbed the global market for materials, particularly steel, sending prices soaring.

Neil Raj-Kumar, the managing director of the Twin Island Group, with subsidiaries in real estate and construction, is no one better placed

to balance the pros and cons of building versus purchasing a home or commercial building.

The company deals in property development, construction, real estate, financing and other facets of property ownership.

"As a developer with a real estate agency attached to the group, I see perspectives from the eye of the buyer/consumer and the supplier," he said.

In essence, he said, "it's a total buyers' market."

Real estate prices have dropped, he estimates, by about 30-40 per cent, owing to market shifts brought on by the pandemic.

And it's certainly not stagnant, he said, as demand is high and prices are becoming more competitive.

The demand for higher valued homes in Port of Spain has markedly dwindled.

Instead, he says, "There is a demand for homes in Port of Spain now for \$1.5 million. There are lots (of units) costing \$2.5 (million) that are not selling."

Additionally, he said, "banks are eager to lend because of liquidity in the system," meaning it's easier to access a mortgage once sufficiently employed.

But property development has been a completely different story over the past 18 months or so.

Most of the problems surrounding the local construction sector stem from a global shortage in the supply of building materials, particularly steel, which has seen prices soar to unprecedented levels; not to mention issues with cargo shipments.

Prior to the pandemic, steel, a most basic element of construction, floated at around \$4 per pound, locally. The price is now approximately \$10 per pound.

This is largely a result of the prolonged closure of steel mills internationally.

Lumber, like many other building materials, is fully imported. Fortunately, prices recently fell after after months of shortages and rising prices. Cement rose at an average

of about \$40 per bag to over \$100 per bag at some hardware stores in recent months, although it has lowered since, thanks to a number of suppliers.

Other types of building aggregate, like sand and gravel, faced similar sharp rises and minor declines in prices, but unlike many other materials, are not imported.

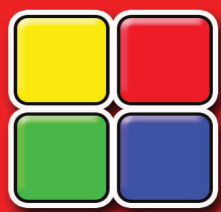
Glenn Mahabirsingh, president of the TT Contractors Association, explained that global price shifts, like that of lumber, take time to reflect in smaller markets like ours.

"The knock-on effect takes a while, and then there's still a demand and supply issue."

He said within the past few days, he reached out to suppliers outside of the US for lumber, particularly in Colombia and Panama.

All materials containing metal, he said, have increased in costs substantially since the start of the pandemic and have barely let up.

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Time is right for deals

continues from page 3 >>

Structural steel, handrails, electrical wiring (copper), are some examples.

The supply issue stemming from foreign exchange is felt by all in the local production and supply chain, and ultimately the customers.

"Suppliers, because of the problems obtaining forex, they quote you and ask you to pay an advance payment.

"From my experience, there is a strong client-supplier relationship. As far as possible and understanding all the complexities, from forex, international shipping prices, increase in manufacturing (costs), they'll work with their (regular customers) to keep the price down.

"In fact," Mahabirsingh said, "this covid situation has created great relationship building between the suppliers and contractors in terms of working out the scenarios to deliver the project because we still have to deliver the projects.

"Clients still have tight budgets. You, the contractor, have to come up with innovative and value engineering options to deliver the project, like the changing of design without affecting the functionality.

However, there is something that needs to be capitalised on in the industry— migrant labour.

"Fortunately, due to the influx of migrant workers into Trinidad, labour has managed to remain stable," said Raj-Kumar.

"(I suggest) registration of migrant labour (and that) specialised skill sets be recognised and recorded for placement within industries.

"Not just in construction," he said, "but medical, food and beverage et cetera."

Labour is a massive factor contractors take into construction costs. Unlike other factors, however, it is one that has become more accessible and cheaper for contractors and sub-contractors.

"Admittedly," Raj-Kumar said, "There isn't a nice way to put this but they (immigrant labourers) produce far more work, demanding far less wages. Is that not good business for contractors to hire them?" He referred to Venezuelans, whom he estimates account for just about just under a third of the local construction labour force. About 60 per cent, he said, are local and about ten per cent are Chinese immigrants.

Shortage of construction materials, forex calls for desperate measures

In business, relationships are everything.

Raj-Kumar filled Newsday in with an open secret: "Materials are now being offered to the highest bidder, because of the limited supply of material."

Supply is further limited by the suppliers being allocated insufficient foreign exchange to make bulk purchases.

Most would argue there is nothing inherently wrong with hardware stores reserving their limited building supplies for their regular or "preferred" customers. There is certainly nothing illegal about the practice.

But the results are clear: Contractors and developers are having major issues starting and indeed completing private projects.



Cement recently rose to over \$100 per bag at some hardware stores. The price has been lowered with the reopening of the construction sector, thanks to a number of suppliers. PHOTO BY ANGELO MARCELLE

They are forced to compensate in some way.

Putting on his developer's hat, Raj-Kumar said, "We are looking at deals for land at lower prices so we can then sell at lower prices. We could only sell what the demand is there for."

Developers are seeing a "very strange phenomenon," Raj-Kumar said.

"It's costing us 30 per cent more to build but your selling price is 30 per cent less."

For first-time buyers, this creates an opportunity to be able to afford homes at prices unheard of for many years.

And, another plus. "The competitiveness of the real estate market has also pushed developers into becoming more creative in their designs thereby offering more value to customers.

Raj-Kumar said the Ministry of Planning and Development ought to "adjust their mindset and policies to stay connected with

what is happening on the ground."

He said building codes in TT are "well regulated through the government and its corporation, but it must now become more progressive in its planning policies for future expansion."

Further adjustments to zoning laws should also be considered.

"By government relaxing building permissions, to increase the number of units that can be done on land zoned for multi-family dwellings, it will aid in keeping property prices affordable."

A change in mindset, he suggested, involves "a more progressive way in which we look at buildings, moving from the traditional two-storey building to multi-storey buildings," especially as real estate in desired areas becomes more scarce.

Government has offered exemptions as an incentive to developers to build homes at affordable prices.

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Planning approval goes online, step to removing bureaucracy

ANDREW GIOANNETTI

PROGRESSIVELY, the Ministry of Planning and Development's Town and Country Planning Division (TCPD) has started an online portal allowing potential home owners, developers and contractors seek digital approval.

All agree it is a step, but far more must to be done to ensure applications are processed far more quickly and efficiently. And, that goes for the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA), and others.

Otherwise, as Twin Island Group managing director Neil Raj-Kumar rued, you can see "well over 125 men, sitting idly, waiting to work on just one site."

Newsday asked Joint Consultative Council for the Construction Industry president Fazir

Khan his thoughts on delays for approvals from the relevant state agencies.

"Historically this has been a problem," he said.

"The bureaucracy of the approving agencies is phenomenal. The pandemic may have had a positive effect in some cases as it clearly established the need for these agencies to leverage on long available technology to improve there efficiency and increase their transparency as well."

Technology might well play a part in countering corruption, or perceived corruption.

Khan said, "It is well established that lack of transparency in all aspects of government business is directly related to increased corruption.

"With online applications and transparent reporting, we can expect to see a reduction in the corrupt practices that plagued many of

the approval agencies."

He said there has been some "discernible improvement along these lines" in recent times with entities like TCPD doubling up on their e-access efforts during the pandemic.

It is "understood" by many associates of the local construction industry that approvals are granted a bit faster among public projects given their scale, and obvious inter-ministerial connections.

Raj-Kumar suggested that the TCPD weigh their applications based on scale, the number of people it will employ, and other crucial factors. Many, including him, are willing to pay an added fee for fast-tracking of applications.

He said the government cannot expect private construction to move full speed ahead if all the relevant government agencies aren't on the same page with the contractors and developers.



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With the reopening of the construction sector, work on several public projects, including the San Fernando Waterfront project, has resumed. Public construction projects, like in many countries, are the backbone of government investment in the economy. PHOTO BY ANGELO MARCELLE

JCC head: Legislation, transparency has never been more important

ANDREW GIOANNETTI

Government investment in public infrastructure during an economic downturn serves to stimulate the economy, Fazir Khan president of the non-governmental Joint Consultative Council for the Construction Industry, acknowledges.

"This is true for most economies in the world and TT is no exception," Khan told Newsday.

"The trickle down effect of expenditure in large public sector contracts is unquestionable."

He said the recent re-commencement of the government projects would have already benefited hardware stores, quarries and other suppliers.

"This would have carried over to the transportation sector and included several small businesses and individuals that service the construction sector."

"When the entire private and public construction sector was reopened there was already some momentum as economies of scale would kick in."

"The effects," he said, "are far reaching."

"One can easily see how the fast food industry benefits when workers go back to construction sites. Our industry comprises consultant engineers, architects, planners and surveyors as well and thus also gets these people and their staff back to work."

Public construction projects, like in many countries, are the backbone of government investment in the economy.

According to the Ministry of Finance's Review of the Economy 2019, the construction sector accounted for 5.8 per cent of the country's GDP for the previous year.

Last year, the Ministry of Planning and Development was allocated some \$229.6 million, an increase of \$22.9 million from the previous year.

TT's inability to drastically improve its ease of doing business international standing can prove a hindrance to further development in the private sector.

Last year, TT ranked 105 out of 190 countries in the World Bank's Doing Business 2020 report. Even less flattering, TT ranked a lowly 126th in dealing with construction permits, scoring 64.1 out of 100. Essentially, the metric measures the average time taken to build a warehouse, inclusive of obtaining the relevant documents, like construction permits and utilities connections.

A review by Oxford Business Group (OBG) found that in TT, the process required around 16 separate procedures and 254 days,

considerably longer than the average in Latin America and the Caribbean (15.5 procedures and 191 days).

OBG, however, observed that the cost of warehousing in TT is significantly lower compared to the rest of the region, at a mere 0.1 per cent of the building's total value, compared to the regional average of 3.6 per cent.

With regard to building standards, OBG noted: "Although located south of the Caribbean hurricane belt, TT still experiences heavy rainfall from tropical storms and lies in a seismically active area. In August 2018, the country experienced a 6.9-magnitude earthquake, which caused extensive damage to the western part of Trinidad."

"This highlighted the lack of compulsory formal building codes, with 80 per cent of buildings at risk of damage from earthquakes."

It said many architects, contractors and engineers "adhere to the International Code Council's International Building Code (IBC), which was adopted in 2015 by the government."

It said that because the state was required to pay US\$7,000 per year for the right to use the code, it was not renewed.

"This decision was met with some criticism from sector players, as the IBC addresses the effects of flooding and adverse weather conditions," according to OBG.

In terms of building materials, OBG said, "The majority of building materials in TT are imported, which can cause delays in the construction process due to excessive bureaucracy and difficulties clearing customs."

In 2017, figures from the Observatory of Economic Complexity identified iron piping (\$38.2 million), coated flat-rolled iron (\$31.4 million), raw iron bars (\$26 million), prefabricated buildings (\$25.9 million) and unglazed ceramics (\$14.6 million) as the five most imported building materials in TT.

It added, as is well-established information, that "local companies are also faced with the challenge of obtaining foreign currency, impinging on their ability to import building materials."

In terms of government projects, Khan told Newsday, in light of the economic downturn, "Transparency is more critical now than ever."

He said, "With less money to spend and with pandemic recovery requiring more money in social relief, we can do well as a country if more of our tax dollars result in beneficial use by the public."

"Lack of transparency increases opportunities for corruption and inefficiency which we can ill afford."

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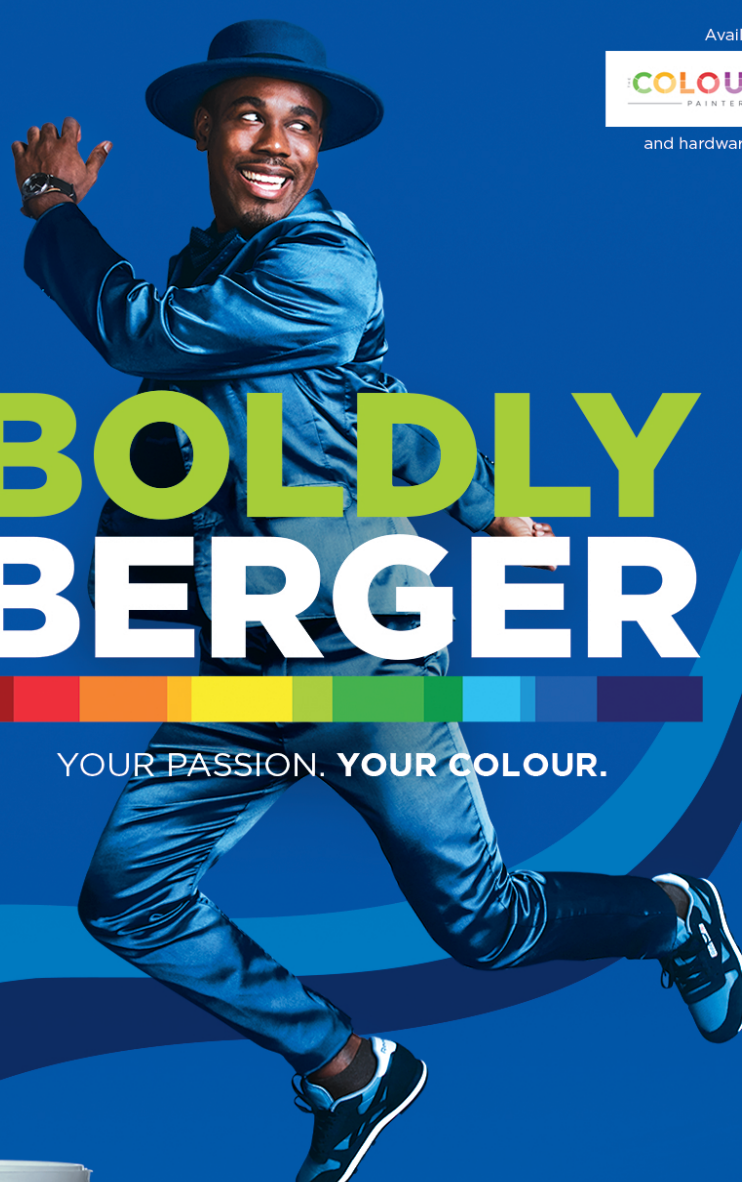
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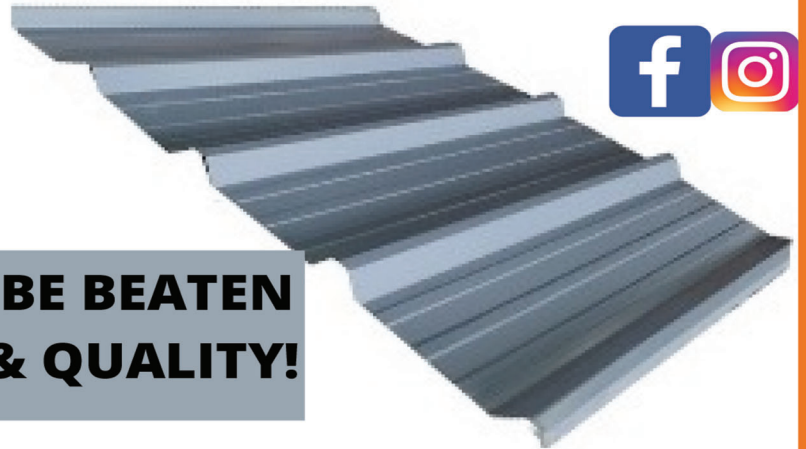
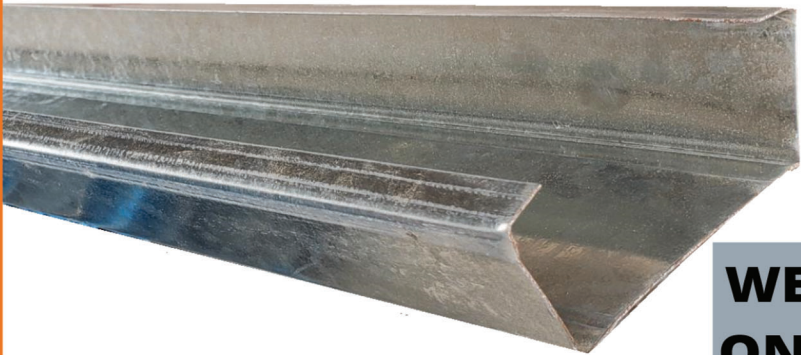
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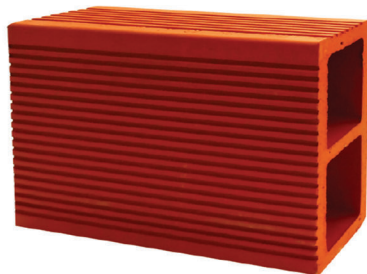
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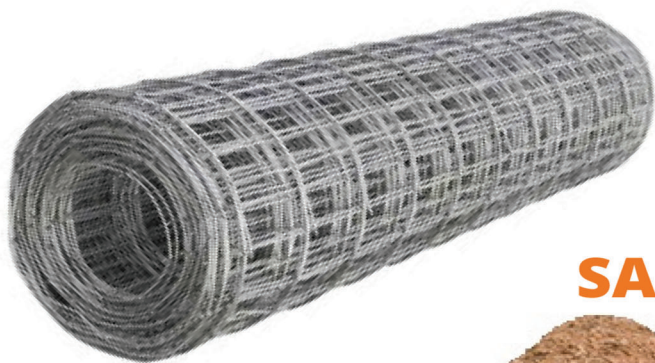
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JIM ARABIA

Covid19 has forever changed people's relationships with buildings. Workers aren't sure they want to return to the office and employers aren't sure they can convince them to. Builders recognise that construction plays a key role in keeping people both safe and healthy. Healthy buildings, therefore, use innovative design elements and sustainable technology to help occupants lead healthier, happier lives.

Green building trends and innovative technologies have the end goal of creating healthier structures, but what exactly does this mean for construction companies? There are different ways to make buildings healthier, depending on factors like location, climate and a company's vision.

What is a healthy building?

A healthy building aims to make its occupants happier and more productive through responsible building methods, efficient construction equipment and natural design elements. This can include incorporating light filtering elements, rainwater harvesting systems, energy converters (such as solar panels) and even smart apps to manage daily operations more efficiently.

The science behind productivity finds that building health directly contributes to performance. Health performance indicators (HPis) are metrics that track building health by assessing the structure and its occupants. With filters and smart ventilation, healthy buildings reduce the presence of disease-causing pathogens and give us cleaner spaces to breathe.

While an unhealthy building can have obvious red flags like hazardous materials or mould buildup, it's the hidden dangers of toxic buildings that are the most worrisome.

Foundations of a healthy building

The criteria that measure a building's health were developed by researchers at Harvard's TH Chan School of Public Health as a result of analysing over 40 years of data. Some of these indicators are more obvious than others — moisture and poor ventilation can contribute to the accumulation of mould and poor water quality may indicate a more serious problem.

However, there's not always a clear giveaway that a building needs improvement. Sometimes, unhealthy indicators are more difficult to pick up on. Employees complaining about a cold office may seem more like a nuisance than a performance inhibitor, but research shows that even small changes in temperature can negatively affect productivity.

Nine elements of a building's design and construction were determined to affect the health of occupants:

Ventilation	Dust and pests
Air quality	Noise pollution
Moisture	Lighting and views
Water quality	Safety and security
Thermal health	

Covid19 is forcing builders to reassess ventilation in their ongoing and future products. The American Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) acknowledges that ventilation can transmit airborne pathogens like the coronavirus. New research suggests that a comprehensive ventilation management plan reduces transmission of pathogens up to 80 per cent by utilising air scrubbers, occupancy management and more.

While the current pandemic might not be a concern forever, it's already influencing building plans to reduce future outbreaks.

Checks and balances to safeguard public money

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Khan said this is why the JCC and other other private sector bodies have been lobbying for the last 20 years for procurement legislation.

And, with regulations laid in Parliament just before it closed in early July, he said the it is expected to be debated in both Houses in September.

He said it will be "a firm step" if the legislation can be operationalised this year.

"The present government's track record is dismal as they



The Crystal in London, UK. PHOTO TAKEN FROM COREFIVE.CO.UK

How construction fights disease and saves lives

How healthy buildings are certified

There are three common certifications used to determine a building's relative health. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) and WELL (International WELL Building Institute Building Standard) certifications measure different aspects of sustainability and quality to determine which buildings are healthier than the rest. Each certification system relies on different criteria to assess building health. Sometimes, buildings can even be precertified based on their plans.

These certifications assess a building's energy efficiency (LEED), environmental sustainability (BREEAM) and general health and safety for occupants (WELL).

Each certification rewards different levels of compliance: WELL and LEED certify "silver", "gold", and "platinum" buildings. BREEAM buildings that pass certification are marked with one of five designations, ranging from "passing" at the low end to "outstanding" for the highest achievement.

Healthy buildings in the real world

Healthy buildings are more popular than ever as more firms decide to invest in environmental sustainability. These buildings can take the form of entire new structures or adaptive reuse projects that turn older structures into renovated healthy buildings.

Greenscaping is already one of the most dominant trends in construction today. One National Center for Biotechnology Information study found that exposure to green spaces had a significant positive effect on mood. Smart daylighting, where

buildings adapt to incoming light and reduce the need for electricity or blinds, is a popular alternative to all-glass façades that flood offices with light and heat.

Here are three prominent examples of healthy buildings that are changing communities and improving lives of occupants:

Bloomberg Campus (London, UK)

Bloomberg's new European headquarters holds a 99.1 per cent BREEAM Outstanding rating. The "world's most sustainable office" displaces thermal energy to run without traditional heating or cooling for most of the year. The development restored an ancient Roman temple site, opening access to the public for an immersive and educational element to this healthy structure.

Apple Park (Cupertino, CA)

Apple Park's distinctive circular design capitalises on exposure: the world's largest sheets of curved glass frame seamless views of 175 acres of hilly parkland. The building's design allows greenscaped views from all exterior and interior rooms. Apple Park's Ring Building is also the largest LEED Platinum-certified structure in North America, at 2.8m sq ft.

The Crystal (London, UK)

The Crystal was designed to exceed standards. When it opened its doors as an event centre, it was the world's first LEED Platinum and BREEAM Outstanding certified building. Large, angled windows bring in light while blocking out heat, while solar panels cover its jagged surfaces to capture sunlight from different angles through the day. It produces much of the energy it uses. *(bigrentz.com)*

larger contractors."

He said sub-contractors may have management and financial capacity but larger ones have better access to skilled and unskilled labour, and equipment.

He said, "The Procurement Act prescribed in great detail the various methods for procurement, with adequate checks and balances to ensure proper spending of public money.

"We need the regulations to be resolved in Parliament to move toward full-operationalisation of the OPR (Office of Procurement Legislation) to realise any benefit in the medium term from this legislation."

have been procrastinating since 2016 with the Procurement Act of 2015. I am hopeful that we can have a procurement officer with teeth before the end of this year."

Asked if the government should promote smaller contractors, Khan replied, "The construction industry in TT is a relatively complex and experienced one.

"Projects need to be conceptualised, checked for feasibility and contracted in the best interest of the public.

"Splitting contracts to facilitate smaller contractors is not guaranteed to give the results intended. Many smaller contractors and sub-contractors (are linked) to