



CASE STUDY

Property construction using a greener Steele

When former US Vice President Al Gore's environmental documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* arrived on Sydney's cinema screens, Oliver Steele and his entire staff were the first in line to see it.

"Generally, staff want to be involved in environmental projects. They feel they don't know enough about sustainable building," Oliver says. In his experience, they're also very keen to learn new skills to help put their environmental ideas into practice.

Steele Associates Construction is a residential development company based in inner Sydney. Established 12 years ago, the company now employs 30 staff including a construction manager, contract administrators, site managers, accounts and administrative staff, carpenters, apprentices and labourers. The company, along with its sister company, Steele Associates Architects, are fully carbon neutral businesses. Every project has its emissions offset through the Carbon Reduction Institute.

Staff hiring

"When hiring staff, I look for people with an interest in the environment and some environmental experience" Oliver says. He notes that flagging the environment as a key recruiting tool doesn't just help him select the right staff, but also attracts a healthy supply of the best candidates for the job. "Having an environmental focus makes us an employer of choice – it's like the boss stands for something."

It's good practice to hit the ground running by offering employees a green-friendly working environment. The acquisition of green skills is quicker and easier with staff that are already on board.



Steele staff in discussion during a training meeting.

Company:

Steele Associates Construction & Steele Associates Architects

Business:

Building Design & Construction

Workforce:

30 staff

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Staff education

Oliver uses project review meetings where staff can make suggestions on how to improve the company's environmental practices. The meetings help explain business decisions like the introduction of Green Star Three concrete – which uses 40 per cent industrial waste products – across all projects this year. These regular forums encourage a productive culture of democracy in the workplace and also ensure that all staff skills are kept up to date.

"We have introduced Wednesday afternoon as a training day," Oliver says. "It's a good time for eco-friendly product representatives to educate our staff on their products. We look at environmental issues such as erosion control, housing insulation and draft control. We also discuss regulatory issues, like BASIX compliance."

Oliver ensures staff have every opportunity to avoid complacency and 'slipping' into bad practice by prioritising the use of the latest technologies, products and design innovations and by encouraging attendance at trade shows and expos.

"It's important to educate your staff, and dispel some of the myths they believe about the environment and the place their work practices have in that," Oliver says. One of his other priorities



Kangaroo Valley house with shading devices to north glazing, water tanks and flowing indoor-outdoor space.



Interior of residence with good cross ventilation, thermal mass in an exposed concrete slab floor, and low VOC (volatile organic compounds) finishes

is to educate his customers and clients at the same time. By fostering the expectation among consumers that businesses will act sustainably as a matter of course, Oliver nurtures a wider understanding of environmental concerns.

Environmental care

Steele Associates present environmental care as a given – part and parcel of the job, rather than a value-added trimming. “If sustainability is on the client’s agenda, then I take that further. If the client is not swayed by environmental arguments, then I use other selling points like long-term cost and health benefits.”

“For example, when clients want air-conditioning, we recommend hydronic heating and cooling systems as an alternative. Clients see their investment paid back in two to seven years with these systems.”

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Not all clients are convinced, as market differentials sometimes come into play. “The upper end of the market is better positioned to think about quality, health, comfort and value,” Oliver says. “For the lower end, cost savings and immediate benefits are more important.”

But even when sustainability isn’t built into a project, Steele Associates ensure that their production side carries all necessary environmental obligations. “The carbon emissions from all projects are offset and clients know that when they agree to the work. It doesn’t significantly affect the price and, as far as I know, we are the first in the world to do this. We spend extra time quantifying materials needed so there is less wastage.”

Oliver Steele is one of the lucky ones – his personal passion for the environment has proven that sustainability can equal profitability. His staff and clients benefit from business practices that encourage all participants to consider green skills – even to the point where they now demand more environment credentials.

STORY LINKS

Steele and Associates:

<http://steeleassociates-carbonneutral.com>

Carbon Reduction Institute:

<http://noco2.com.au>

BASIX:

<http://www.basix.nsw.gov.au/information/index.jsp>