The Role of Construction in relation to Sequestration Post Kyoto – The Unrecognized Solution?

Abstract

The Kyoto treaty came in to force on the 16th February, 2005 and member nations are wondering how they can meet their objectives.

This paper demonstrates the potential of the built environment to deliver the emissions reductions and sequestration required. It points out that doing so is profitable and more so under Kyoto but will require new technical innovations.

Keywords

Built environment, construction industry, carbon credits, economic, emissions, trading, sequestration, mitigation, abatement, sustainable, sustainability, CO_2, concrete, waste, embodied energy, lifetime energy, eco-cement, Kyoto.

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The Kyoto Treaty

On the 16th February 2005 the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, drawn up in Kyoto, Japan in 1997 to implement the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change, finally became international law.

Signatory countries are legally bound to reduce worldwide emissions of six greenhouse gases (collectively) by an average of 5.2% below their 1990 levels by the period 2008-2012.

For the protocol to become law it needed to be ratified by countries accounting for at least 55% of 1990 carbon dioxide emissions. The key to ratification came when Russia, which accounted for 17% of 1990 emissions, signed up to the agreement on 5th November 2004. Ratification of the agreement means Kyoto will receive support from participating countries that emit 61.6% of carbon dioxide emissions.

Member countries have developed their own methods to meet targets. The EU for example has established quotas and a market to buy and sell credits. Unfortunately however some major emitters have not joined making it difficult for resident companies to trade their credits. The official view in the US and Australia is that it would ruin their economies. The Australian government has developed its own scheme called "The National Greenhouse Strategy" that will attempt to reduce emissions by only 10.1% by 2012, which is an 8% increase on 1990 levels.

It will be a difficult task for most of the member countries to meet their Kyoto targets and already nations are falling behind. Spain and Portugal in the EU were 40.5% above 1990 levels in 2002. Canada, one of the first countries to sign, has increased emissions by 20% since 1990, and they have no clear plan to reach their target. The Japanese are also uncertain about how they will reach their 6% target by 2012.

The Construction Industry's Role

Under Kyoto member countries have agreed to reduce net emissions. This means that as well as a reduction in emissions there is a role for sequestration. The protocol does not concern wastes but as wastes have embodied energies it is arguable that recycling represents reductions in new energy usage.

Construction is the biggest business on the planet and accounts for some 70% of all materials flows. The construction industry impacts on the wider environment in a number of ways.

A high proportion of pollution incidents occur in the industry. Construction and demolition waste alone represent a high but unknown proportion of total waste. Too many buildings are environmentally inefficient and do not make best use of limited resources such as energy and water. The energy used in constructing, occupying and operating buildings represents a high proportion of all greenhouse gas emissions in industrialized countries[1].

The built environment is our footprint on the planet. This paper explains how we can reduce our footprint and profitably make the built environment much more sustainable ensuring our long term survival.

There are a number of opportunities that come to mind:

- Reducing the energy it takes to run buildings (lifetime energy).
- Reducing the high level of waste in construction
- Utilizing wastes to make construction materials
- Reducing emissions during the production of construction materials
- Sequestering carbon by utilizing carbon containing materials
- Using more durable materials for construction

Reducing the Lifetime energy of Buildings

Cites, and the buildings of which they are comprised, consume a large proportion of the total energy produced within developed countries. Much of this energy is derived from fossil fuels that produce emissions. The need to reduce the energy consumed by residential and commercial buildings is now widely recognised. This has been acknowledged by Australian and many other governments and has resulted in strategies intended to increase the efficiency of building construction and operation. I will not go into this area as it is already well understood and the subject matter of many conferences.

Reducing the High Level of Waste in Construction

Waste management in many countries is in a state of anarchy with no effective plan in place to maximize recycling and minimize waste. Statistics are hard to obtain and not collected on a uniform basis. Some countries claim a high proportion of waste recycling but more thorough investigation reveals that this usually only relates to municipal waste which is a low proportion of the total. There

[1] Unfortunately there is a paucity of statistics and it is very hard to compare as measurement criteria vary.

is also a growing trade whereby problem wastes not meeting regulatory requirements in one country are exported to another with less stringent requirements.

Building wastes in industrialised countries probably account for 15-40% of all wastes going to landfill. According to Maria Atkinson of the Green Building Council of Australia the figure in Australia is around 40% (Atkinson, M., 2003).

The EU lead the world in improving these appalling statistics. Regulation (EC) No 2150/2002 of the European Parliament on waste statistics was adopted in November 2002 and published in the Official Journal of the European Communities in December 2002. The objective of this Regulation is to establish a framework for the production of European Union-wide statistics on the generation, recovery and disposal of waste.

The high level of waste on building sites can be improved and the main drivers will be cost recovery and changes in construction materials and methods.

There is value in wastes and as recovery methods improve using them as inputs will reduce costs. The use of robotics in construction will allow the exact delivery of the correct amount of material as does an ink jet printer to a sheet of paper, new methods of reinforcing such as the tech tendon method invented by me will reduce cut off and wastage of steel. Eventually, in developed countries at least, buildings will be robotically constructed on site or off site in factories with much less overall wastage. New materials will continue to be invented with next use in mind such as eco-cement concretes that can be recycled back into eco-cements and aggregates.

Utilizing Wastes to Make Construction Materials

Using more supplementary cementitious materials is a major objective of the Portland cement industry and widely documented as such as for example in “The cement sustainability initiative, our agenda for action”(WBCSD, 2002). Fly ash (pfa) and ground vitrified blast furnace slag (gbfs) are mainly used and are wastes from other industries. Pfa by itself does not have cementing properties whilst gbfs does.

To the extend to which less PC is required and no further energy is used because of their use they are more sustainable.

Carbon wastes such as sawdust and timber from construction if taken to landfill eventually becomes methane which is a greenhouse gas 21 times worse than CO_2. It would be better to reduce this kind of waste (see Reducing the High Level of Waste in Construction above). As an alternative they could be used to create new building materials that permanently sequester the carbon component. Examples include products made with sawdust/chips and wood waste such as building panels and many sound reflecting or insulating panels. A recent breakthrough has been the invention of tec, enviro and eco-cements by my company which being low alkali reduce reaction problems with organic materials.

Non organic wastes including building materials or other wastes taken to landfill can also be used and the concrete industry is already utilizing high proportions of pozzolanic industrial wastes. Again, TecEco cements contribute by allowing even greater proportions to be used.

Many wastes can contribute physical property values. Take plastics for example which are collectively light in weight, have tensile strength and low conductance. Tec, eco and enviro-cements will allow a wide range of wastes to be used for their physical property rather than chemical composition and as over two tonnes of concrete is produced for every man woman and child on the planet there is huge scope.

Reducing Emissions during the Production of Construction Materials

Building materials use energy during their manufacture and are said to have embodied energy.

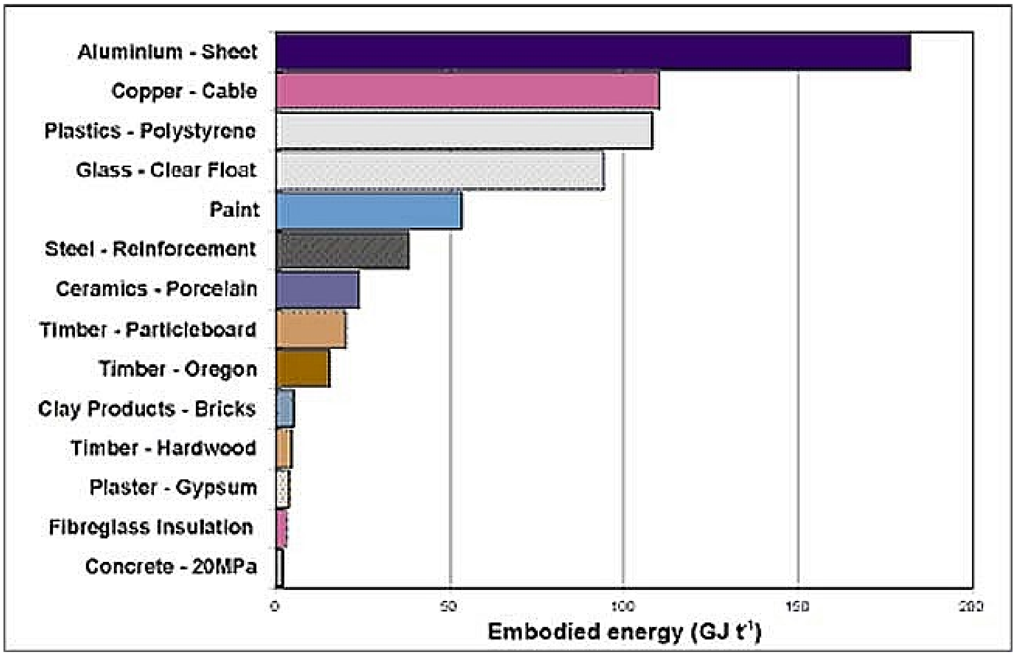

Figure 1 - Embodied Energy of Building Materials (Tucker, S., 2000)

Unfortunately the concept of embodied energy does not include chemical releases of gases as is the case for example with the manufacture of Portland cement.

In almost every industry tremendous savings in the energy required to produce things have resulted in cost savings and greater sustainability

Concrete

As of 2004 some 2 billion tonnes of Portland Cement (OPC) were produced globally (USGS, 2004) (see Figure 2), enough to produce over 7 cubic km of concrete per year or over two tonnes or one cubic metre per person on the planet.

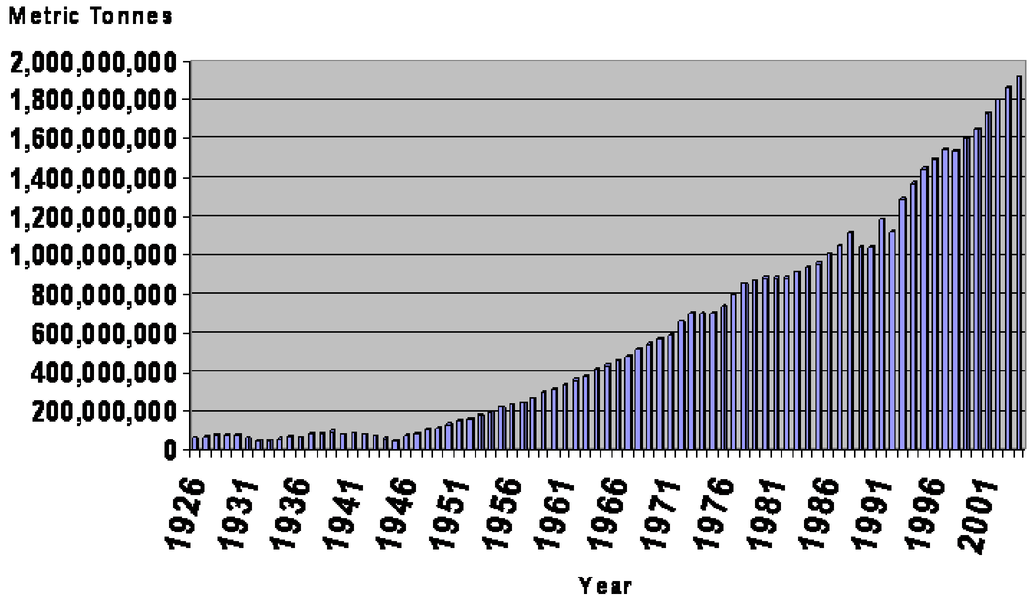

Figure 2 - Cement Production = Carbon Dioxide Emissions from Cement Production 1926-2002 (Van Oss, H., G., Hendriks, K. et al., 2003)

As a consequence of the huge volume of Portland cement manufactured, considerable energy is consumed (see Figure 3 - Embodied Energy in Buildings (Tucker, S., 2000)) resulting in CO_2 emissions. The gas is also released chemically from the calcination of limestone used in the manufacturing process.

Various figures are given in the literature for the intensity of carbon emission with Portland cement production and these range from 0.74 tonnes CO_2 / tonne cement (Hendriks, C. A., Worrell, E. et al., 2002) to as high as 1.24 tonne determined by researchers at the Oak Ridge National Laboratories (Wilson, A., 1993) and 1.30 tonne (Tucker, S., 2002). The figure of one tonne of carbon dioxide for every tonne of Portland cement manufactured (Pearce, F., 1997) given by New Scientist Magazine is generally accepted. Production thus equates to emissions (See Figure 2).

Because of the huge volume used, Portland cement concrete is the biggest single contributor to embodied energy in most buildings. As a consequence Portland cement concretes account for more embodied energy than any other material in the construction sector (Tucker, S., 2000).

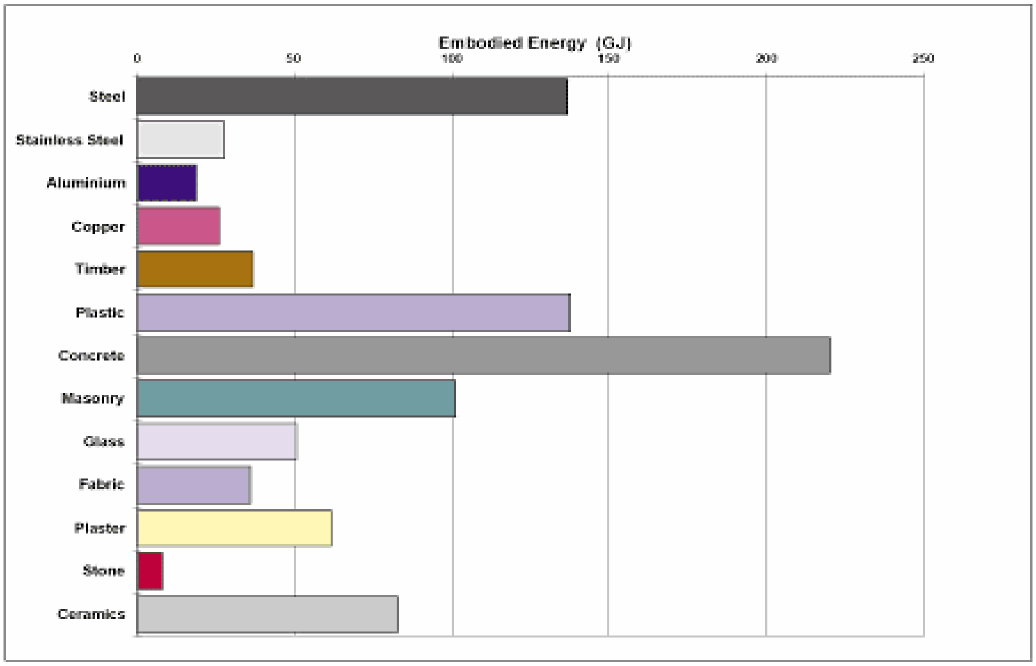

Figure 3 - Embodied Energy in Buildings (Tucker, S., 2000)

Because of the huge quantities made Portland cement is also one the biggest single contributors to the greenhouse effect after the burning of fossil fuels, accounting for between 5% (Hendriks, C. A., Worrell, E. et al., 2002) and 10% (Pearce, F., 1997) of global anthropogenic CO_2 emissions.

Global production of cement is likely to increase significantly over the coming decades as:

- Global population grows;
- GDP grows[2];
- Urban development continues; and
- Industrialisation increases.

Associated with such huge usage and growing demand is the enormous potential for improvement in properties and sustainability.

The challenge is to reduce net embodied energy and chemical releases. One obvious direction is to utilize more renewable energy and especially non carbon cycle renewable energy such as solar and solar derived energy. Another is to eliminate gaseous emissions.

For concrete, the most widely used construction material, future improvements will involve capturing gases during manufacture and this is easiest for a magnesium component as demonstrated by TecEco, my company using kiln technology characterized by calcination and grinding in a closed system and the use of non fossil fuel energy.

Geopolymers are also of relevance as they are essentially made from fly ash and other pozzolans and caustic alkalis. To the extent that fly ash remains a waste they are therefore more sustainable. Unfortunately metakaolins and other kandoxi, also generally required,are not wastes and require energy to make.

[2] Especially in China, India and other so called underdeveloped countries.

Sequestering Carbon by Utilizing Carbon Containing Compounds

During earth's geological history large tonnages of carbon were put away as limestone and other carbonates and as coal and petroleum by the activity of plants and animals.

Sequestering carbon in the built environment mimics nature in that carbon is used in the homes or skeletal structures of most plants and animals.

Figure 4 - Biomimicry - Houses of Carbon

Carbon can be used as components of building materials in basically two ways:

As a Fiber, Filler or Massing Component

The use of waste organic fibres such as discussed above is becoming increasing popular. For example James Hardie Industries manufacture a product called Villaboard which includes wood fibre. In the US there are currently many papercrete homes being built. Another interesting product is Zelfo which is a plastic like material made from cellulose and potentially from wood waste.

The use of carbon is not limited to cellulose and derivatives. Previously mentioned was the example of plastics and other companies have made use of rubber waste.

As a Binder

The concept of using carbon as a binder is not new. After all ancient and modern carbonating lime mortars are based on this principle. TecEco have now taken the concept a lot further with the development of eco-cement which is based on blending reactive magnesium oxide with other hydraulic cements. Magnesium is a small lightweight atom and the carbonates that form contain proportionally a lot of CO_2 and are stronger. The use of eco-cements in construction, particularly in conjunction with the previously mentioned closed system kiln also invented by TecEco would result in sequestration on a massive scale. As Fred Pearce reported in New Scientist Magazine (Pearce, F., 2002), “There is a way to make our city streets as green as the Amazon rainforest”.

Getting the Aggregates Right

Lime mortars are actually very common; unfortunately however the sands that are being used are suitable for hydraulic binders not carbonating binders. If the right sands were used additional strength would ensue as the result of proper carbonation. Papers on this subject are available for download from the TecEco web site.

Building using more Durable Materials

Building materials are not as durable as they could be and in the future it would make sense to improve durability, not only because buildings that last longer do not have to be replaced as often, but because if we are to incorporate wastes in building materials the less often they are recycled and these wastes potentially concentrated – the better.

The TecEco cement technology substantially improves the durability of concrete.

Taking Advantage of Kyoto

To take advantage of the trading opportunities offered under Kyoto the construction industry will need to overcome a number of hurdles.

The first hurdle is the conservatism that has plagued the industry for many years. Industry participants will need to embrace new technologies, ideas and performance based standards.

The concrete industry is particularly trapped by tunnel vision resulting in a fixation on Portland cement because of the quirks of history and the fact that it is, relative to what has been previously been available, a good binder (well almost anyway). Participants need to realize they are in the glue business. Organic binders are going out of favour because many such as urea and phenol formaldehyde have been linked to cancer. Pure mineral binders are much safer[3]. There are a big range of mineral binders as one glance at sedimentary rocks should teach us and many have specific advantages. Industry managers need to understand that what is gray is not necessarily great and all they make will not be what goes out the gate in years to come.

There are strong drivers for change that will need to be embraced. These include robotics, the need to utilize wastes of all kinds, to reduce embodied energies, lifetime energies and emissions and, of course, the Kyoto factor. Many of these drivers will are also supported by sound economics.

If we are to house the world more cheaply and effectively, remembering there are many who still do not have a proper home, then we are going to have to use what is available and cheap locally and wastes are usually inexpensive. In some countries labour will be inexpensive but in others robotics will be required to achieve these goals.

In this new paradigm of robots buildings like the new Eureka building in Melbourne, Australia would go up with a central structural core but all around would be built with robots squeezing out a cementitious composite with a consistency a bit like toothpaste that will be smoothed off with little robo paddles. This technique is being developed by many people all over the world and I suspect the most advanced is Behrokh Khoshnevis at the University of Southern California.

We need to think at the supply and waste end when we design building materials – not just about the materials utility phase in the middle. Making the built environment not only a repository for recyclable resources (referred to as waste) but a huge carbon sink is an alternative that is politically viable as it potentially results in economic benefits.

By including carbon, materials are potentially carbon sinks; by including wastes many impacts at the end of the supply chain are solved.

Toxic and hazardous waste technology and concrete technology will merge because the fact is the standards on risks associated with using wastes and the pressures to do so are both rising rapidly. Even now it no longer makes sense to just encapsulate waste materials in a concrete and bury them. They have to be so safe that we may as well make useful product out of them.

Having said this it is important to remember that the objective is to get CO2 out of the air. To achieve this we really need to support what is an artificial price for carbon introduced by the treaty with a real underlying and hopefully one day dominating value.

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[3] Note however as there have also been some warnings about plasticisers and various other organic additives to concrete. It follows that if you could get to the end result without them is would be better

We have to find ways to get CO_2 out of the air that everybody everywhere uses because they result in tangible economic benefits. We cannot expect people to live more sustainably because it is the right thing to do. If some governments are waiting for a technical revolution the size of the one started by James Watt then they had better stop their procrastination and talk to me because TecEco technology is one of these ways.

TecEco technology will make concretes more sustainable and, as in the long run, sustainability and profit are actually the same direction, there is nothing to fear from them!

Conclusion

A number of ways are suggested to make the construction industry more sustainable including reducing the energy it takes to run buildings (lifetime energy), reducing the high level of waste in construction, utilizing wastes to make construction materials, reducing emissions during the production of building materials, sequestering carbon by utilizing carbon containing materials and building using more durable materials. There are no economic disadvantages of any of these ways and some, such a reducing embodied energies are clearly economic. Underlying all is technological change, particularly in relation to materials.

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