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Architect calls for 'defensive' building design

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Building green is a moral and philosophical imperative, not something that should be based on fleeting theories of global warming or global cooling, says Paul Sandori, an architect with Toronto-based Revay and Associates Ltd.

"It's imperative to keep green building independent of global warming theories," says Sandori. "We should be building green regardless of whether global warming is happening or not."

Sandori points to recent scandals and setbacks that have plagued global warming theorists, including "climategate," the release of a series of incriminating e-mails from a British centre where researchers apparently agree to massage data to support global warming theories.

"People say there's consensus on climate issues and climate change and what's causing it," says Sandori.

"There was a recent arbitration involving failure of a concrete slab in an aircraft hangar.

"We've been researching the properties of concrete for 150 years, yet two perfectly reputable scientists can sit down and disagree on the science behind concrete structure. Likewise, it makes no sense to say that there's a global warming consensus."

Glenn Ackerley, a partner at Toronto's WeirFoulds LLP, specializing in construction law, agrees that consensus is a rare commodity.



The Swiss Re building in London uses half the energy of a typical building of the same size.

"Even when you have two experts on opposing sides of a case agreeing on some of the facts, they will still find areas where they're in direct opposition," he says.

"Good and credible experts are rarely in complete agreement."

Global warming may be real, and may be caused by greenhouse gases, says Sandori, but intelligent building standards need not depend on that theory.

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"Time will tell," he says. "But global warming may also fade from the scene just like global cooling and peak oil in the seventies. Let's forget about that and build green as a permanent moral imperative."

Sandori says he prefers the term "defensive building" because it describes the essential purpose of shelter. He notes that North American builders seem to have forgotten that buildings are supposed to protect people and equipment from the environment, not bring them closer to it.

"I look at the sea of condominium buildings on the lakefront of Toronto and elsewhere, each of them surrounded by glass," he says. "Buildings should protect you from the elements — they shouldn't be viewed as an opportunity to enjoy nature from your home."

Sandori notes that humans are prone to building monuments — the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal at the Royal Ontario Museum, for example — and will probably continue to do so.

Buildings such the 40-floor Swiss Re tower in London are different. It employs natural ventilation where possible, and uses two layers of glass that enclose a ventilated cavity outfitted with computer-controlled blinds that respond to weather and sunlight.

It uses half the energy of a typical building of its size while protecting the people inside.

"It will be part of our job to monitor the long-term performance of green buildings and materials and to make sure they perform over the long term, regardless of the climate," Sandori says.

Sandori reminds builders of a single concept, no matter which building standard leads to structures that better protect us from the environment while reducing energy costs.

"Nature is scary and it will always be scary," says Sandori.

"Don't invite it into your buildings, whether the world is ultimately going to be warmer or cooler. If you want to enjoy nature when it's nice, open the door and take a walk outside."

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