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Pushing the Green Agenda

By Gena Ng

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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability was not even a buzz phrase yet when Singapore property developer City Developments Limited (CDL) made the journey to an uncharted territory.

But this did not stop Esther An from pushing the green building agenda.

"It was a great challenge for us to start a journey in uncharted territory," says An, CDL's Chief Sustainability Officer.

"When we first integrated sustainable practices [into] our business, climate change or CSR were not familiar concepts to many in this part of the world. Hence, in the beginning, achieving buy-in from both internal and external stakeholders was one of the major challenges as they had initial reservations."

But her perseverance and determination for CDL to go green paid off.

CDL has consistently been listed as one of the Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations for the past six years. It also remains the first and only Singapore company to be listed in the Global 100, the FTSE4Good Index Series since 2002, and the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices since 2011.

The driving force behind the property conglomerate's successful journey in green building, An herself has been named as one of the Global Sustainability 100 leaders since 2011.

But when CDL first planted its seeds in green building some 20 years ago, the idea of combining sustainability and construction seemed far-fetched.

"The building and construction industry was widely perceived to be destroying the environment before constructing [even began]," she recounts. Many also had reservations about the idea of CSR and sustainability.

First seeds of sustainability

"Having grown up in Hong Kong, which is more densely populated [than Singapore], I tend to appreciate a clean and green environment more," says An, who believes that "both individuals and corporations can play a part in conserving the environment and natural resources".

She had the opportunity to put to action her conviction for a clean environment when she joined CDL in 1995. She set up the firm's CSR department and has been deeply committed in the company's green agenda ever since.

"In order to drive change in the way business operations are run, we need to drill down to a company's fundamental corporate DNA," says An. "Conserving the environment and caring for the community were integrated into our corporate mission."

With the support of then managing director Kwek Leng Joo, An sought to change the misplaced perception against the building industry as having a negative impact on the environment.

The idea was for CDL to lead the change by integrating sustainability into its corporate mission.

'Conserving as we Construct'

In 1995, CDL embarked on a mission to institute its vision of 'Conserving as we Construct'. This precluded that she had to get the company's stakeholders, contractors and suppliers on board.

"To help stakeholders understand and support our sustainability vision and mission, we devoted much time and effort to communicate our goals and plans," says An, adding that CDL also introduced key platforms such as its Environmental, Health and Safety (EHS) policy and the 5-Star EHS Assessment System and Green Procurement Guidelines to engage their contractors and suppliers to work with CDL in achieving its long-term sustainability goal.

As a result of its commitment, CDL has been recognised as the pioneer in 'green environment' innovations. It has become a big influencer in the construction industry, inspiring fellow developers to follow CDL's example.

"Over the past two decades, we continuously innovate, invest in and improve on the way buildings sustain life," says An. She cites the example of CDL's Savannah Eco-condo that was launched in 2003. It is the first residential property in Singapore to power its club house lighting and water heaters using solar energy.



CDL's Tree House condominium set the Guinness World Record for the largest vertical garden. (Photo: CDL)

In 2014 CDL set the Guinness World Record for the largest vertical garden, built in the newly completed Tree House condominium. The garden is a natural insulation that filters pollutants and carbon dioxide as well as reduces heat absorption, leading to air-conditioning energy savings of between S\$12,000 and S\$24,000 annually.

This year, CDL will be the first in Asia to use an advanced construction technology called Prefabricated Prefinished Volumetric Construction (PPVC) to build its new executive condominium in Sembawang in the northernmost part of Singapore. The PPVC method generates less waste and is expected to increase productivity by more than 40 per cent, and "may very well revolutionise the way we build for the future", An says.

Launched in March 2013, CDL's D'Nest development entered the Singapore Book of Records in 2013 for the 'Largest Solar Panels in A Condominium'. Solar panels measuring a total of 1,520 square metres will be installed on the rooftops to harness solar energy to offset the electricity consumption for common areas. D'Nest's solar panels system is expected to harness over 200,000 kWh of energy a year. Approximately S\$60,000 can be saved in electricity bills, potentially reducing monthly maintenance fees payable by residents.

Most fulfilling journey

Since An kick-started CDL's journey to sustainability, the property developer has bagged numerous awards such as the BCA (Building & Construction Authority) Green Mark Platinum Champion Award.

The journey has been fulfilling for An.

"It has been a most fulfilling journey and privilege for me to play a key role in steering CDL's sustainability strategy," says An. She is especially appreciative of the support from CDL's top management and members of the CSR committee "who have helped CDL pioneer visionary approaches, champion ground-breaking innovations and set new sustainability benchmarks".

An has been making an impact on the environment on behalf of CDL for nearly two decades. And she's only getting started.

"Moving forward, the next phase of our CSR journey will be to 'Create Future Value' for generations to come," says An. "CDL will continue to conserve for the future while shaping the present."


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