

UKIBC Case Study

Sturgis Associates case study with Romi Dahele, Director

Sturgis Associates is a UK based firm of architects. Our core business has been commercial architecture, master planning and refurbishment of buildings. One of the key offerings that we have here is in sustainability, specifically low-carbon design. What we found was that increasingly clients, based in London or in the States, basically the West, had signed up to a sustainable development policy and therefore wanted to be able to deliver on that. Earlier, no-one else was in that space. It surprised us to realise that what we had been doing for quite a long time was becoming a well known brand, sustainability.

Why expand to the Indian market?

Our workload is cyclical. Growth requires expansion to different sectors or different markets. There was a strategic push in 2006 /07 to look at other markets, and we commissioned a study to look at the various geographical locations we could go into. We looked at Russia, the Middle East, India, China, Africa, South America. All the upcoming areas.

Was India a clear winner?

There was an analysis done on barriers to entry, what the offering was, how much the competition was, and how valuable our offering would be, and from that we decided that India seemed to have the right mix of a market able to sustain growth, a need for our specialism, and ease of business. Yes there's red tape, but it's understandable. Language – I personally understand the language, but English is the mainstream one. Systems are similar. In a five forces analysis, we came up clearly with India, sections of the Middle East, and Africa, as the three key areas for us to look into.

Did you seek UKTI's assistance in the research?

We attended a UKTI conference, where they connected us to UKIBC in 2008.

Speaking of sustainability, how much growth do you feel India will see?

The market is huge. There's depth and breadth to the market, and India, because of its outsourcing opportunity, gave Sturgis the opportunity to reposition ourselves as a pioneer in our field, internationally. While India is in itself a new market, expansion to India then gives you the capability to see into other sectors, and other regions.

Did you plan to incorporate in India or set up an office?

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We have set up an office in Delhi. We looked for a partner for over a year. We have found an exceptional one, which is good news. We did not want a back of house partner, an outsourcing partner. I see our India office as providing us with a value added service. It's not a processing or cost centre. These guys are very good. We have just over 40 staff, on retainer. The architects in India give us a much more diverse capability. The Delhi office will be our front of house office.

What is the exact role of your Delhi office?

They contextualise our designs, deal with the local authorities and anyone on the ground. What we provide are Sturgis' practiced standards, the sustainability element, the design ethos which clients ask for, and a level of detail that our experience has led us to know that clients appreciate. In fact, some love and care on small details of the building, which we can control.

You employed UKTI services through a reception on the eve of the January 2009 delegation. How was it?

UKTI pulled out all the stops. They put the reception together for us, in the day between David Miliband leaving and Peter Mandelson arriving. They didn't cut any corners as a result of that pressure. The reception was for delegates, and for clients. UKTI did a really good job, so we had a good response.

How did you find your first business trips to India?

The UKIBC cultural awareness seminars that we had helped. The element of confidence was partly down to the cocooned environment that UKTI creates. They regulate everything, and we had very successful trips in January and September. We'd done the research here, we knew we had a good product, we knew that the market was thirsty for it. What we wanted to do was go out to India and let people know about it, and develop it.

In the UK there's a developed awareness of environmental consciousness and green technology. Is that the case in India too?

I think India is quickly going to surpass the UK in their take-up of low carbon technology. In December I presented at the India green building council. The subject resonated well with the audience, the response was very enthusiastic. Perhaps more revealingly, I met with a large developer in Hyderabad who admitted that he didn't care about environmental sustainability, but he said that one thing he'd realised was that being environmentally friendly saves money. And what he was interested in was saving money, so if he happened to be saving the environment, then great; he just wasn't interested in tokenism. That was off-record for him, but it's one reason that business embraces such technology.

Can you give a simple example of a sustainability product in buildings?

A simple one is solar panels. There is rationing in most states of electricity. They're

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blessed with sunlight. Perhaps solar panels are a slight luxury, but provided that they are reasonably priced, then it's not just a matter of being environmentally friendly - it's having a constant source of electricity, so that you are sure of supply and independent.

Does building from new, with new technology, play a factor in India's potential as you see it to lead on the incorporation of sustainability in infrastructure?

The simple solutions are easy. The complicated ones cost money. If you have a structure and add 10% or 20% to the cost to make it more flexible, over a 200 year lifespan that flexibility allows the structure to be used to its full capacity. Otherwise you find costs and inconvenience are incurred tearing parts down again and redeveloping. Now if you put that into an Indian context, of a typically family orientated business, in it for the long-run, the model works perfectly. Architects need to lead design and incorporate new technologies. India may well change the way that sustainability products are managed and employed, by economy of scale.