

# The green office revolution catches on

■ An interiors fit-out company champions the environmental cause.



Photos: Christopher List

■ Summertown Interiors' corporate headquarters and showroom in Jebel Ali Free Zone showcases the company's work in a fully-functional, green environment

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Why bother with an eco-friendly office? What sort of an environmental detriment does office furniture pose? And how can the lighting chosen for the workplace and its usage help us save the planet?

There are no easy answers to these, but in this eco-conscious world there is a growing awareness of what happens to our furniture when it reaches the scrapheap, how energy can be saved by using a simple lightbulb, and how these changes apply to both offices and homes.

Leading – or should we say 'Lead-ing' – the way in green offices is Summertown Interiors, which is not simply fitting out offices across the UAE with environmentally-friendly fixtures and fittings but also helping to create energy-efficient workplaces.

The firm's managing director, Marcos Bish, expounds: "It is our environmental approach that sets us apart from the competition. We look at how we can reduce energy consumption in a workplace. For example, because we're promoting environmentally-friendly offices, we tend to use lighter colours in our design to reduce energy consumption – the darker the area, the more artificial light is needed." Point taken, but Summertown is also a staunch proponent of energy-saving lighting. While a traditional office uses between 20 and 25 watts per square metre in terms of lighting, "in our office it's just eight watts. It's not an easy thing to do, you have to

take a lot of factors into consideration. For instance, if you reduce your lighting, you have to ensure that when it is dark outside [probably due to poor weather conditions] you'll still have enough light to continue working. You have to be smart about that in your design – that's where we come in."

It's hardly surprising therefore that the firm is renowned and touted as an 'eco champion'. It doesn't stop at providing green work environments, but also implements what it teaches. Summertown made its intentions clear by becoming the first interior design and turnkey fit-out contractor to conform to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design's Gold Standard (LEED) compliant interiors. Its corporate headquarters and showroom in Jebel Ali Free Zone showcases the company's work in a fully-functional green environment.

## Lead criteria

"Leed-compliant developments have to meet six criteria: sustainable sites, water efficiency, optimised energy performance, minimal energy use, usage of materials with recycled content and indoor environmental quality," says Bish.

"You can be gold, silver or bronze, and the more points you score the more green you are. Our headquarters is both an office and a showroom, where clients can see our green solutions in practice, the usage of space, and so on. We show as many solutions as possible in our office environment. It's a working showroom."

The showroom's design priorities

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include creating a quality office environment that not only reflects the client's brand, but encourages communication and smooth workflow, and is a place where people would, conceivably, like to work in.

"Everyone talks about energy-saving, eco-friendly designs, but they don't necessarily ask for it," the official states.

"The big international companies have corporate social responsibility programmes and tend to be more green than others. However, that doesn't mean that we don't offer them green solutions. Our staff is trained to work within the parameters of Leed, so, even if clients don't ask for a green office, we still offer them solutions that are green. We usually suggest recyclable and biodegradable materials or recommend certain manufacturers, a combination of these can offer energy-saving and, sometimes financial, benefits.

"This way, our clients can 'go green' without incurring extra costs. If they want to go fully-fledged green they may have to spend extra money, but then they will

earn that back over time."

While this is an age of green awareness in the workplace, it is also one that heralds a new trend for economical design. Due to the current economic climate, there is a marked rise in smaller, more functional workplaces, whereas before businesses in Dubai were demanding high spec, spacious interiors with expensive materials and finishes. "Commercial spaces and offices used to be so much more flamboyant, and they were designed to show-off. Today, however, there's less money around and people want more efficient workplaces

Today they are opting for smaller offices but with the same number of people, which means that we need to be more efficient in the usage of space and bring other solutions to the table," Bish notes.

Summertown's response to calls for economical design includes space-saving solutions that use vertical space and wall space productively.

"We've also noticed a shift from enclosed offices to open plan offices, so there will be fewer cubicle systems and more people working in a wide, open space; this is good for communication and information sharing."

Going forward, Summertown wants to pitch its expertise to bigger international organisations as well as growth sectors such as insurance and legal firms. "Whether you're designing an educational library or an office, it's all about how you use the space effectively... and we have the expertise to do that."