

# Is greenwashing a threat to sustainable construction?

By [Bunny Bala](#)

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The saturation of environmental journalism - focused on the Paris Agreement, COP27 and associated topics - is resulting in construction professionals' apparent boredom when sustainability is raised. However, the vigorous campaigning, according to recent reports, is warranted, substantiated by increasing extreme weather events.



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The current approach to the 30-year-old concept of sustainable development in construction is that of scrutiny and challenge across the world. Businesspeople find themselves over-messaged, resulting in fatigue within built-environment circles when it comes to sustainability for positive climatic change.

Advocates in the industry are singularly focused and use conferences, continuing professional development programmes (CPDs), councils and governing bodies to coerce professionals into compliance. Those sensitised to the sustainability agenda are subjected to divergent information in an ever-increasing frequency. Against this backdrop of information overload, greenwashing of products is commonplace.

## What is greenwashing?

Greenwashing is when a company misleads the public (generally through marketing) into thinking their products/practices/services are environmentally friendly or have a more significant positive contribution to the environment than is true. Understating a company's involvement in environmentally damaging practices is also considered to be greenwashing.

## Tell-tale signs of greenwashing

Societies, both wealthy and poor, experience the negative impacts of climate change. As a direct result, humankind is paying attention and increasingly making purchasing decisions considering aspects beyond the traditional. Forbes reports,

“Some businesses might participate in greenwashing without even realising it, simply because of the lack of universal standards around ESG reporting.”

Often, messages proliferate making product performance claims that are not based on rigorous test results as brand building considers ‘eco-clean’ as an essential pillar for success.



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## Active steps to avoid greenwashing

Carbon emissions are no longer the domain of environmentalists and scientists exclusively; businesspeople and the general population consider emissions in daily purchase decisions. Companies are increasingly becoming subject to scrutiny, especially now that information regarding sustainability is more widely available.

While industry insiders are often well-versed regarding sustainability, this does not mean that all messages aimed at the public align with reality. Listed below are some ways businesspeople can avoid greenwashing.

1. **Organisational learning:** Understand sustainability definitions and keep abreast with related laws or regulations. Additionally, the actions and approaches of entire supply chains to the organisation within the context of sustainability should be monitored continuously.
2. **Hype:** Identify vague statements without credible performance literature to support, such as ‘eco-friendly’ or ‘natural’.
3. **Identify the use of trade-offs:** Companies offering ‘eco-friendly products’ that engage in production and waste management activities that are at odds with sustainability principles.
4. **Misleading visuals:** Beware of companies using nature to portray the illusion of an organisation that is concerned with minimal impact on the environment. It may be so that within their supply chain or factories a very different behaviour takes place.
5. **Conflicting sustainability claims:** Assigning misleading descriptions to hazardous products, for example, ‘green asbestos’.
6. **Identify respected third-party certifications:** These would include LEED, BREEAM, Green Star, Net Zero/Net Positive certification, Green Tag, EPC, EPD (full life-cycle analysis documentation).
7. **Sensitivity to false claims:** It may be so that partial truths hide real activities that do not align with sustainability best practice.

## Repurposing of the existing built environment

The 13th edition of the *Emissions Gap Report* reveals that we are falling behind on the required pace of decarbonising to avoid reaching the climate tipping point. In order to avoid this taking place, the efforts to constrain temperature rise within

1.5°C must be intensified.

Buildings and the construction process are identified as areas where meaningful reduction of emissions can be realised. Statistics published for the sector continue to highlight the missed opportunity. The *2022 Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction* reveals the sector currently contributes 36% of global energy usage and 39% of (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, an all-time high.

The African continent has been identified, through construction material usage and processes, as a significant contributor. Studies highlight buildings' energy consumption is primarily attributed to heating and cooling. That is, should a structure perform poorly, more energy is required to attain a comfortable temperature for occupants. Architectural window films, in this instance, are a quick and effective solution to improve the thermal performance of an existing structure.



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## Retrofits makes sense

The African continent's building stock is extensive, however, many of these structures are either under or incorrectly utilised. Surveys reveal this to be applicable specifically to the economic nodes of metropolises. As such, the South African government has made efforts to repurpose and renovate dilapidated buildings.

Maximising the performance of existing building stock through improving energy performance is key. Making use of materials and solutions with a low carbon footprint when retrofitting builds on appropriate structural design for energy consumption and carbon emission reduction. It can be argued that employing these strategies can rejuvenate the urban fabric of any city to strengthen the economy and wellbeing of society.

## Delaying is not an option

Organizations must reduce emissions significantly to change the current trajectory. Furthermore, the private sector has a crucial role to play in illustrating the real value of transformation. Benoit Bazin, Saint-Gobain's CEO, reiterated during COP27 that "sustainable construction can no longer remain niche in emerging countries. It must become the new normal".

Furthermore, synergetic collaboration between governments, councils and other relevant stakeholders within the private sector is an urgent imperative. Eco-innovation of construction products underpins net-zero responsibility, particularly in countries with advanced economies and technologies.

As unexpected weather events become more frequent due to climate change, increasing the resilience and adaptability of buildings is essential. The strategies can be intricate and often require informed professionals who can give guidance towards enacting sustainability.

## Transparency and third-party verification

Greenwashing gives rise to a trust deficit for companies who claim to have sustainability practices or environmentally friendly products, including those with legitimate claims. In the information age, facts can be checked quite easily. Companies who are determined to meet their Paris Agreement goals by 2050 are transparent in their conduct. As such, they usually make third-party certifications public with Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) and life cycle declarations.

An EPD is a declaration that illustrates the environmental information of a product by assessing product life cycle to enable

evaluation of competitors. Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs) are according to ISO 14040 and ISO 14044. EPDs are created and verified in accordance with ISO 14025. They are recognised by LEED, BREAM and several other international bodies in industry.

The LCA is the methodology used to assess the environmental impacts of a material, product, system or building over its entire life cycle.

Another notable effort implemented by the South African government is the gazetted requirements (mandated by the National Energy Act 34 of 1998 and the SANS 1544:2014) for Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs). According to Sanedi, as of 8 December 2025, building owners will be required to present certificates showing how their buildings perform.



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The building's energy-use characteristic is recorded and rated following a colour-coded system from A-G, similar to that seen on electrical appliances. The regulations apply to state-owned buildings with a total floor area greater than 1,000m<sup>2</sup>; 2,000m<sup>2</sup> and larger privately-owned buildings are also required to comply.

## The bottom line

Greenwashing undermines the efforts of companies following sustainable practices, complicates the decision-making process of conscientized customers informing their decisions to making the world a better home. The construction and property sector must be always vigilant; sourcing proven green products to support net-zero goals, will result in short-, medium- and long-term benefits for all stakeholders.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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