

Report by Lars Petterson of Scandinavian Homes after attending the 11th International Passive House Conference in Bregenz, Austria.



The weather was as unbelievably beautiful as the perfection of the service and the cleanliness of the toilets in the Bregenzer Festspielhalle at the lake Constance. A few great days with a lot of interesting and very nice people. The 40 strong Irish contingent was very busy from morning to late evenings. Thanks to Paul Dykes of SEI in Bandon for organizing us all. More than 1000 participants from 40 countries attended this booked-out event. The conference is the most important happening of the year for all those seriously interested in energy issues and construction.

Passive houses, that is houses that are so well insulated that they require no heating system, have been around since 1990. Germany and Austria are pioneers with around 12000 houses and apartments already built. In the Scandinavian countries the cold climate makes it a lot more difficult to build to the strict

Passive house standard, but some 100 units are built and several thousand houses are supposedly being projected or in the process of being built at the moment. It is the English speaking world as a group that seem to be shockingly ignorant and backwards. Small Ireland seem to be the leader of this group with a dozen or so passive houses built to date. UK seem to have 1 (one) project in construction phase, and the US and Canada showed one house built in Minnesota last winter and another one in California. There were interested parties from Eastern Europe and some very interesting presentations of passive house projects in Poland and Croatia



This time the conference focused on architecture of passive houses as well as renovations of old buildings using passive house components and philosophy. I attended excursions to refurbished apartment buildings, some social housing, but also old industrial buildings that recently had been brought up to fully passive energy performance. Quite interesting, but for a new house builder I was so curious to see if there were any new methods or products presented.

In the exhibition hall adjacent to the conference, materials suitable for passive construction were displayed. The Germans and Austrians have many components of very high quality. The natural pride and high standard of workmanship, as well as the ever-present high quality of details is so refreshing. Especially the external doors - they are fabulous (but so are the prices - € 2100 - 6000 excluding VAT and shipping for one door!)

Their windows are also quite nice with very high performance. From an environmental and fire risk point of view, I am not so keen on the PVC frames used so frequently. The wood frames on show seem to consist of too many components that I would worry about their lifespan in a damp climate. Another concern is the fact that all windows and doors I saw opened inwards. I found out that in northern Germany, on the coast, they use outwards swinging windows because of the driving rain there. (They have absolutely no driving rain compared to Ireland)

I like to end this little article with two quotes from the world's Passive House man no one, the man that created this concept, the Passive House Institute, and this event; Dr Wolfgang Feist:

“This is a sensitive issue but it need to be raised: Each and every one of us is convinced that he or she has the best, cheapest and most suitable solutions and the necessary know to implement them. But let me put that straight: you are wrong! All of us can still become better at what we are doing, and it is our duty to strive to do so”

“There is no half way passive house”

(Does he refer to all half-baked houses with complex heating systems that pretend to be passive?)

Galway April 18th 2007, with passive greetings, all the best from Lars Petterson