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The new DGNB certification system provides targeted incentives to build more innovatively

Certifying sustainable buildings has become established practice in the German construction and real estate industry in recent years. Despite this, the actual aims of certification – especially the way it is viewed by the German Sustainable Building Council (DGNB) – are often still of secondary importance for many building owners. For the DGNB, the main motivation has to be to build better, quality-assured buildings. To place greater emphasis on this, an updated version of the DGNB System has been developed in recent months, simultaneously setting new building certification benchmarks – including on an international level. Specific recognition is now given to developers and building owners who address sustainability factors early on, including on a holistic level. More emphasis is now also placed on climate protection and the circular economy. The system has been optimised so it can be used more as a planning tool, also rewarding innovation,

“There’s a whole lot more to this update of the DGNB System than just adapting targets,” states Dr Christine Lemaitre, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the DGNB. “This is a decisive step forward in turning the spotlight on the underlying purpose of building certification, across the board. It’s a planning tool that motivates people to think carefully about the task of construction so they design buildings that – ideally – take the entire life cycle into account. It’s also a tool for use in quality assurance, providing help during all phases of planning and construction for buildings that are demonstrably better.”

Planning freedom and rewards for innovative solutions

One of the most important changes that has been made to the DGNB System is that it specifically promotes new and innovative solutions. “If certification can help provide incentives in the right areas, it can do so much – like a means to an end,” states Lemaitre. “The key thing is that architects and planners are given enough leeway and they’re not straitjacketed.” For the first time, the new DGNB System addresses this in 18 of the 37 criteria by providing so-called Innovation Capacities. If it can be proven that a new kind of solution or approach achieves the same or better results compared to an existing solution, it is dealt with in the same way for certification.

A similar tack has been taken for the new bonus system, which has now been integrated into a variety of criteria. It does not matter if an underlying idea relates to the circular economy or the sustainable development goals of the United Nations; if somebody goes the extra mile in considering natural resources or climate protection, there are now 22 ways to earn bonus points, all of which go towards certification. “On an international level, the DGNB is setting completely new standards when it comes to building certification,” states Lemaitre. “Nothing has been done until now to explicitly and systematically motivate people to adopt novel, holistic approaches on such important issues affecting the future – such as the circular economy.”

The weightings have also changed within criteria to place more emphasis on early, integrated planning. This affects criteria such as Life Cycle Assessment and calculation of Life Cycle Cost, the two most important criteria used by the DGNB in terms of contribution towards the overall score. The aim is to reward people who start working through different scenarios as they embark on planning and use this as a basis of decision-making for the project.

“We feel it’s important that people don’t just do or document things because the DGNB expects them to,” states Lemaitre. “It’s more about proper planning and improving the quality delivered by individual projects across the board.” This also entails thinking beyond the plot of land a building stands on. As well as addressing factors such as light pollution, the DGNB has now also added four new criteria relating to site quality, and these also go into the overall assessment. For example, if a building contributes to the district or neighbourhood around it, for instance by enhancing the supply of energy, this scores well. The same applies if consideration is given to a building’s surroundings, situation or nearby conditions during the planning phase.

Quality assurance during all phases of the planning and construction process

A fundamental role of certification is to provide an independent assessment and confirmation of actual quality. But it is just as important that measures are introduced during planning and construction to ensure that the envisaged quality standards are actually achieved. To support this, the DGNB has once again optimised a number of points within the system and been particularly careful to address certain critical aspects relating to the value chain while building. For example, to enter the highest possible assessment category for harmful and hazardous materials, it is now mandatory to have

material monitoring mechanisms on the actual building site. Also, site management has to be given a briefing based on the relevant requirement lists for any building materials to be used.

The DGNB has now also ensured its system has a link to the actual operation of a building, which also forms an essential part of sustainability. This aspect is addressed specifically by two new criteria (FM-Compliant Planning; User Communication) to ensure the potential sustainability advantages of a new building are indeed exploited when a building enters everyday use. Factors relating to process quality now receive greater emphasis overall. This is because processes have such a strong influence on safeguarding building quality.

The DGNB is also taking a longer-term approach to sustainability with the new system from a regulatory point of view. This is particularly important when it comes to aspects like the use of refrigerants, where it is already clear that there will be statutory requirements in the not-so-distant future. DGNB certification can help in this area with preventative measures to avoid costly conversions and renovations.

The DGNB emphasises responsible sourcing and links between different industries

The DGNB believes the new certification system will place emphasis on important factors that go beyond the actual task of constructing a building – for instance, when it comes to biodiversity or how the criterion Sustainable Resource Extraction is dealt with. The aim of this criterion is to address the entire downstream value chain of used materials: developers and building owners are expected to adhere to recognised environmental and social standards when sourcing or using raw materials. If the preferred choice is to recycle materials, which could mean that it may not be necessary to ask whether materials have been sourced responsibly, this earns a similarly positive score with DGNB certification.

The DGNB System also rewards buildings that accelerate the transition to green energy and alternative transportation systems. Installations that facilitate the bidirectional charging of electric vehicles are just as positively rewarded as systems that integrate regenerative energy into the technical facilities required for a building. The DGNB actively encourages people planning building technology to make the best possible use of passive energy systems.

The new DGNB System is the result of a comprehensive feedback process

The DGNB unveiled its new certification system in June 2017 in order to allow experts in all areas of the construction and property industry to give their feedback. Over 550 comments were received from DGNB members, auditors and consultants and each item of feedback was checked and processed. A great deal of time was also invested in dialogue with market players who had criticised the previous DGNB System. This was to examine aspects such as practical application. The result is an approach to sustainability certification that matches the specific requirements of users and does more than ever to promote future-proof buildings.

The new version of the DGNB System is now applicable to nine different types of building use: offices, consumer markets, shopping centres, business premises, educational buildings, large residential buildings, logistics buildings, production buildings and hotels. Over the coming months, the DGNB will be working intensively on adapting other system variants for building certification to the logic of the new version. An English version and guidelines on use of the DGNB System for international projects will also be developed over the course of the next year.

The DGNB is market leader in Germany and an established international player

The DGNB has already awarded more than 2800 certificates in over 20 countries. With a share of over 80 per cent for new buildings, for a number of years the DGNB has been the undisputed market leader in Germany in industrial property. Annual growth in recent years has repeatedly exceeded 20 per cent. “We’re noticing a continuing growth in interest in certification as well as the topics addressed by the DGNB; the system is held in high esteem, particularly abroad,” states Lemaitre. “This is where we’re providing a seamless link with the new version. This puts a practical tool into the hands of anyone interested in sustainable building to help them make their buildings better.”

A PDF of the new version of the DGNB System can be downloaded for free from the DGNB website. The DGNB has also published background information with a summary of the most important changes that were introduced for Version 2018. This can also be viewed by going to the DGNB website:

www.dgnb-system.de

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The German Sustainable Building Council – DGNB

The German Sustainable Building Council was founded in 2007 and has around 1200 members, making it Europe’s biggest network for sustainable building. The aim of the DGNB is to promote sustainability in the construction and real estate industry and instil awareness of building sustainability in the broader population. The DGNB is an independent non-profit organisation. Its certification system offers a planning and optimisation tool for evaluating sustainable buildings and urban districts. It was developed to help organisations enhance the tangible sustainability of construction projects. The DGNB system is based on the concept of holistic sustainability, placing equal emphasis on the environment, people and commercial viability. The DGNB Academy is an education and continuing professional platform, which has already provided more than 3000 people from over 30 countries with official qualifications in sustainable building.

Images: www.dgnb.de/de/aktuell/pressemitteilungen

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