

# INFRASTRUCTURE

## Not just an apartment

Realtors churn out products to cater to clients' changing demand

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh's real estate companies are increasingly incorporating new features and solutions to their apartments to cater to the demands of clients who want not just a flat, but a place they can call home.

"We always try to align us with changing market scenarios," says Toufiq M Seraj, managing director of Sheltech (Pvt.) Ltd, one of the leading real estate companies in Bangladesh.

Md Mahmudul Kabir, executive director for sales and marketing of Building Technology & Ideas Ltd (bti), echoes Toufiq M Seraj. "When new technologies, solutions or practices in the sector emerges, bti involves top experts of the country, consults with them and finds ways to add new ideas to our system," said Kabir.

Mohammad Abdul Awal, managing director of Structural Engineers Ltd (SEL), another top real estate firm, says commitment is key to SEL's success. "It is important to honour commitment and deliver quality products. There is no alternative to quality." Since its inception in 1983, the company has handed over around 181 residential projects, comprising about 5,000 apartments. It is currently implementing about 50 projects in different parts of the city. SEL designs projects for middle-income and lower middle-income groups.

Sarwar N Chowdhury, senior assistant vice president for business development and

customer care at Bay Developments Ltd, said customisation is the key selling point of the company. "We build tailored apartments. This means, no two apartments in the same building will be similar. Even the apartments on the same floor will be completely different."

The real estate sector, which began its journey roughly three decades ago, has gone through a lot of changes in recent times. Twenty to 25 years ago, apartments were built for the rich largely in areas such as Eskaton, Siddeshwari, Gulshan and Dhanmondi and the middle income groups

cheaper price," he adds.

bti has also adopted a fixed price policy, meaning the price of a product remains the same irrespective of clients. "We don't sell the same product to two different customers at two different prices. We don't negotiate on prices now. All customers are equal to us," said Kabir.

Earlier this October, bti has introduced high-end features such as smart features in two of its recent projects in Gulshan. "Smart living concept is deeply ingrained in these two projects. The entire house is automated. As a result, you can remotely control light,



had little scope to own an apartment. At that time, there were less than 10 real estate companies selling a few hundred flats a year. However, the sector sold the highest number of flats—18,000 to 20,000—in 2012. The delivery of products, however, came down to 10,000 to 12,000 in recent years because of the slowdown, according to industry people.

But in line with the increasing demand buoyed by people's purchasing capacity, apartments are now being built in all areas of Dhaka city. Small-sized apartments aimed at fixed income groups are being built in areas where the prices of land are relatively cheaper.

"At Sheltech, we have apartments for all sorts of buyers," says Toufiq M Seraj. He says customers want quality products and on time delivery. He says Sheltech has a large design division which employs engineers and architects, giving the company more flexibility. It has own legal department.

Kabir of bti mentions how they are working towards zero waste in its activities and system. It covers material waste, human resources waste, and time waste. "When waste is reduced, it will raise productivity and the cost of a project may even go down significantly but the quality of the products will remain the same."

"This may give a superior product at a

ACs, fans, all security features, and many other things from outside the house."

Sarwar N Chowdhury of Bay Developments said when a unit is sold an architect and a customer care executive are assigned for the unit. The two staff members closely work with the client for two to three years and consult with them and take approval about how the apartment will be built and decorated. "We customise 100 to 150 items in an apartment. Clients choose materials from our shop. It is like building your own house."

Bay Developments introduced double glazed windows in two projects in 2012, the first by any company in Bangladesh. Double glazed windows are an ideal energy-efficient choice with the added benefit of minimising noise. The sealed air gap between the two panes acts as an added layer of insulation. This added thermal resistance reduces the amount of heat escaping in winter and maintains a comfortable home temperature.

Bay Developments has put in place a synchronised generator which supplies power as per the actual demand of a building when the power goes off, instead of running on a full capacity when demand for electricity is very low, according to Chowdhury.



## Fire safety: improving capacities, but a long way to go yet

SHAHER REAZ

Fire-safety has been a lingering concern for the citizens of Dhaka for decades. Of all the major hazards facing Dhaka today, fires pose the greatest risk—congested roads, closely packed buildings, narrow lanes and a general lack of awareness of fire hazards make Dhakaites more at risk of death and injury by fire than any other. In 2016 alone, Dhaka saw over 3,020 fire related incidents with 15 human casualties and 81 injuries, causing over 163 crore Taka worth of financial losses.

However, the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (BFSCD)'s capabilities are improving. Formed in 1982 by unifying the three separate departments of the Fire Service Department, Civil Defence Department and the Rescue Department under the Roads and Highways Division, BFSCD has since grown into a modern rescue unit consisting of over 9000 highly trained firefighters, divers and rescue experts. Currently, there are more than 549 stations of the BFSCD operating all over the country. A recent push from the government in response to an increasing number of fire related incidents has led to the procurement of advanced fire fighting equipment, ranging from top-of-the-line fire trucks, fire fighting motorcycles for easy access to narrow lanes and sturdier portable equipment for firefighting teams.

"The Rana Plaza collapse, Tazreen Garments fire and the Nimtoli fire incidents prompted the government to purchase modern equipment. Before, a fire fighter could not enter a burning building—now, thanks to special suits and breathing apparatus, they are able to enter hazardous areas to rescue trapped civilians," says Brigadier General Ali Ahmed Khan, Director General of the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence department.

While our firefighting abilities have gone up, not much has changed in the fire hazard awareness aspect among the general populace. People still lack the basic ideas of what constitutes a fire hazard, as well as what to do if a fire breaks out. Many do not know the number of the BFSCD emergency hotline—999—and are unsure of how to act while the rescuers are on-site. Often, onlookers crowd around the location of the incident and obstructs rescuers

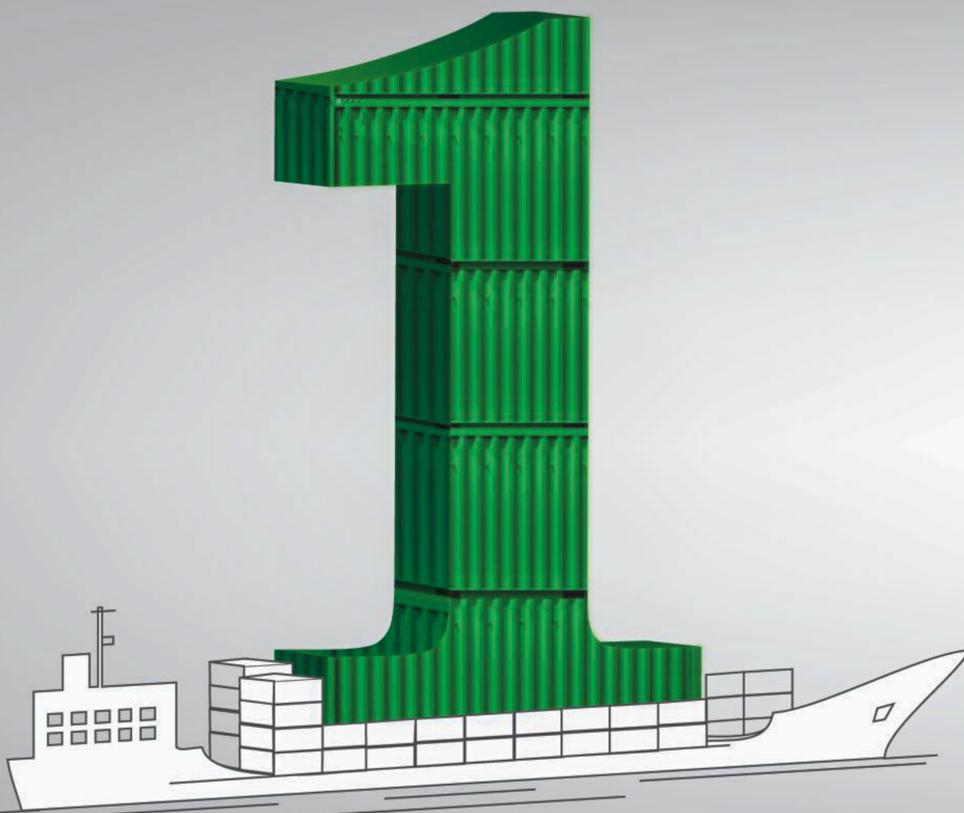
from operating smoothly and efficiently—so much so that the BFSCD has introduced a team of trained firefighters tasked with crowd control duties.

"The BFSCD has always been ready to provide training and fire drills to private and public institutions. We have also taken up the practice of sending notices and letters to various ministries and civic centres, urging them to partake in fire drills—in an effort to raise awareness and preparedness," Brigadier General Ali continues.

While the BFSCD's efforts in educating the general population about fire hazards and rescue operation guidelines are commendable, property developers are not entirely out of the loop either. Almost all of the high-end developers are incorporating modern fire safety guidelines into their buildings, including separate fire-escapes, sprinkler systems at crucial points and multiple fire extinguishers at all floors along with firefighting boxes, as well as instructional signs.

The progress made is not consistent across the city. Depending on the area, the level of fire hazard changes drastically, as do awareness of the issues that lead to incidents like the Nimtoli chemical warehouse fire in June 2010, which left 126 people dead. Lower-income areas of Dhaka, particularly the slums and the areas adjacent to major bazaars, are especially prone to risk alongside older buildings and neighbourhoods, as evidenced by multiple fire incidents in the Korail slum area, Karwan Bazar and certain parts of Old Dhaka. Without a special focus on these areas along with the necessary adjustments to fire fighting strategy and a conscious shift towards policies that enforce fire safety regulations, these areas are vulnerable to a great extent.

"The government's efforts in tackling the fire hazards of Dhaka are commendable, but there's more work to be put in. While there are 13 fire stations all across Dhaka, the BFSCD has proposed setting up satellite stations at strategic locations around the city, so that response times can be cut down significantly. The current spread of fire stations in Dhaka means that a lot of time is spent wasted in traffic—with satellite fire stations, we can do a much better job at saving lives," Brigadier General Ali adds.



## THE EXPORT LEADER

Crown Cement has achieved National Export Trophy thrice for its outstanding performance in cement export. Demand for Crown Cement is gradually increasing at home and abroad for its quality. With the export of Crown Cement, Bangladeshi products are also getting the fame. In addition, Crown Cement is contributing to the national development through foreign currency earning. It's a pride for Bangladesh.

