



The issue of sick building syndrome cropped up in conversation last week. In the late 1980s and 1990s the idea that symptoms of ill health could be associated with presence in a building – often a workplace – was common. The term itself seems to have dropped out of use but it is less clear why.

The issue was raised by a fellow participant in a seminar at Greenbuild Expo in Manchester. The general topic concerned the idea that green building was more than just an end in itself. The built environment affects us in all our doings and beings, so to speak. Thus, greener workplaces have been seen to improve productivity and lower absenteeism, while research at the University of Exeter has indicated that greener open spaces in cities lead to feelings of wellbeing among the inhabitants.

There is a caveat. The online newsletter *Science Omega* quotes the leader of the research, Dr Matthew White of the university's European Centre for Environment and Human Health as saying: "We cannot tell from those studies whether green space improves mental health or if people with better mental health – perhaps because they are richer or have more stable personalities – tend to move to greener areas."

The research follows reports that – contrary to conventional wisdom – green open spaces in cities tend to discourage crime because they promote use and activity by more people.

Meanwhile, what of sick building syndrome? Eagerly I navigated to the HSE guidance on the subject to find out latest developments. There is indeed a document to download: *How to deal with sick building syndrome: Guidance for employers, building owners and building managers*. It was published in...1995!

- Among the other notable features of Greenbuild Expo was the comprehensive Green Deal forum. There was also a great deal of activity on the floor promoting training for anything to do with the Green Deal. There is certainly enthusiasm among the industry for the idea of actually getting something done to improve energy efficiency in the home. We'll have to see whether the Government puts enough of our money where its mouth is.

- Fracking is being kept on the agenda by those who are less than convinced by the arguments in favour. Over the weekend a vigil was kept by opposition groups near Tarleton in Lancashire, during which a mock fracking rig was hauled down and replaced with a wind turbine.

Many such small-scale opposition actions in the US, leading to many local councils in New York imposing local bans, led *The Guardian's* Richard Schiffman to headline his report *Grassroots campaigns can stop fracking one town at a time*

- GM foods have also been in the news again, with the Soil Association warning against what it calls Frankenfoods and reporting the development of a "superwheat". Swedish researchers, meanwhile, have claimed enough is known about the effects of genetic modification to distinguish between high-risk and low-risk activity.

The BBC's *Countryfile* concluded that technology in the form of advanced robotics was part of the way forward in improving food production and showed some small robots (about the size of a hobbyist's radio-controlled vehicle) that, it is claimed, will soon be zipping around the fields doing the work of much larger machines, only without direction and using a fraction of the energy.

As someone who remembers claims on *Tomorrow's World* that we would all have a robotic maid doing the housework by the 1970s, I remain to be convinced.

Chris Stokes