

Building code to step up safety

Bradley Hope

Last Updated: August 22, 2010 9:29PM UAE / August 22, 2010 5:29PM GMT

Tougher building regulations will “root out unscrupulous contractors” who take advantage of loopholes in the current law, but are likely to drive up costs on some buildings, analysts say.

The Estidama building regulations being introduced in the coming year are designed to bolster safety while introducing a unified set of regulations to cut inefficiency and improve environmental standards, according to Ian Dalley, a lawyer in the construction practice of the law firm DLA Piper.

A unified building code was crucial to managing costs, he added. “In the past, there was sometimes some uncertainty over which requirements were mandatory and which were voluntary, resulting in confusion and extra costs in the design and approval of construction projects,” Mr Dalley said.

Health and safety upgrades in the code would root out “unscrupulous contractors who took advantage of [the current code’s] un-prescriptive nature”, he said.

Contractors working in Abu Dhabi have to deal with an amalgam of different codes, with structural standards based on British law, fire safety rules coming from the US, and mechanical guidelines containing elements from both countries, along with some from Australia.

“What the international building code that the municipality is implementing will do is draw all these quite disparate standards under one umbrella,” said Andrew Schofield, the head of buildings at the consultancy Aecom.

“Our view is that, if anything, it should reduce cost of development by eliminating confusion over what standards to use.”

Simon Light, a partner at EC Harris, said the arrival of these new regulations was proof that people in Abu Dhabi were starting to think about the long term of the city, rather than “just the asset creation and short-term output from the construction process”.

“The overall standard of buildings will increase as a result of the codes, which will help to ensure a consistency in the quality of products that will be available in the market,” Mr Light said.



Contractors working in Abu Dhabi have to deal with a variety of codes culled from British, American and Australian standards.
Ravindranath K / The National



“The standard of building could attract more interest from potential investors who will be looking for a guarantee on their return on investment in terms of the quality of product they will receive.”

A key issue for Abu Dhabi’s Department of Municipal Affairs (DMA) will be how it enforces the implementing of each code.

A spokesman said yesterday the code, expected to be issued early next year, “represents a major change to construction practices in Abu Dhabi”.

“The DMA adopts a long-term view that more durable and longer lasting buildings will deliver a better return on investment to developers,” the spokesman said.

“Reduced energy costs and greater sustainability are also potential mid to long-term benefits resulting from energy-efficient construction processes and improved building materials.”

The impact on costs was difficult to predict “as there are many variables involved depending on whether the building is high or low-rise, residential, civic or business”.

In a preliminary guide to the code, the DMA said that “in some cases, the new Abu Dhabi codes will result in increased costs, such as those related to fire safety”.

Developers and construction companies will have to start ensuring new projects comply with the Estidama requirements for environmental sustainability starting on September 1. All new buildings in Abu Dhabi will have to obtain a “pearl rating” of at least one out of four.

This will not necessarily mean big cost rises as advances in environmental building standards had already resulted in a higher quality of work, said Simon Routledge, a director at Davis Langdon, a construction cost consultancy that has worked with the Urban Planning Council and Estidama.

“We estimate it will be a reasonable cost uplift to meet the one pearl requirement,” he said. “This will mostly relate to soft costs, such as architects and engineers.

“Best practice design will provide most of the criteria required.”