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ACCIDENT



Grass is seen on rooftops at Polytechnic University, which has eight such features. Only five of them were submitted for Buildings Department approval. Photo: Edward Wong

CHANGE TACK ON GREEN ROOF DEBATE, TOP SURVEYOR SAYS

Vincent Ho says focus of debate should be on aims of green roofing and commitment to maintenance

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Three slabs of grass sit atop Polytechnic University's Shaw Amenities Building. The vegetation, about 15cm thick and enclosed by barriers, appears dishevelled after a bout of rain. Dark blotches of moisture stain the perimeter.

The Hung Hom campus boasts eight such "green roofs", five of them with Buildings Department approval. Three, including the one at the amenities centre, do not.

The question of whether or not to submit building plans has become a point of debate 10 days after the collapse of a sports hall roof at City University. But as the crisis of confidence over green roofing continues to unfold, professionals are calling for a return to rationality.

"According to building rules, [PolyU] should have submitted plans for approval," said veteran surveyor Vincent Ho Kui-yip, a former president of the Institute of Surveyors. "The curbs and drainage around the vegetation would



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VINCENT HO KUI-YIP

technically constitute building works."

But Ho said it was understandable why the plans were not submitted - current regulations rely heavily on the initiative of owners in submitting a plan for approval -

as the works in this case were quite minor. The two other unapproved roofs are located on the Communal and Realink buildings.

He said the debate over green roofs should no longer focus on whether or not building works should be submitted for approval, but rather what proponents wanted to achieve with green roofing and whether they would be able or willing to maintain it over time.

"The carbon reduction function for such a small area of grass is negligible and there are better ways of cooling down a building. The management and maintenance costs [for a green roof] on an existing structure are very high. Is it worth it?" he asked.

Ho pointed to the evidence of poor drainage on the PolyU building as indicated by the blackened stains seeping from the turf barrier. "It doesn't look ideal," he said. "You need to consider carefully and not just follow trends. If you want to do a good green roof, it will cost you."

PolyU said it had engaged an authorised person and a registered structural engineer to pre-

pare the design of the three green roofs, and the loading arising from the structures was within safety standards. "Therefore the design would not require a submission to the Buildings Department for approval," a spokesman said.

City University and Chinese University made moves last week to remove non-approved green roofs. It is not known whether other institutions will follow suit.

But Chinese University adjunct professor Lam Chiu-ying believed the public was "overreacting" and an isolated incident should not ruin the value of green roofs.

"Saying they are removing the

roof because it is 'dangerous' is just not scientific," said Lam, a member of the government's Environment and Conservation Fund Committee, which has funded green roofing projects at more than 60 schools.

Lam said the government should set clear parameters on which plans needed to be submitted to the Buildings Department depending on the project's dimension or area.

Ho said the easiest way would be to categorise all green roofing projects as minor works, which would put them under a more efficient and simple regulatory mechanism.

"If all green roof plans needed to be submitted for approval, no one would do it," he said.