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CONTENT

Preface	17
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KEYNOTE LECTURES

ON THE DESIGN OF A SURVEY TO MEASURE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN BUILDING <i>CARLES SERRAT, SONIA RODRIGUEZ, NÚRIA FORCADA</i>	19
COLLABORATIVE PLANNING PRACTICE FOR SUSTAINABLE BUILDINGS - A CASE STUDY RESEARCH <i>IVA KOVACIC</i>	26

SECTION I: CONSTRUCTION ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

INVESTMENT ATTRACTION OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC <i>ZARINA BAKIROVA, ANZHELA KHAMZINA, ALENA TICHA</i>	38
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS FOR LARGE-SCALE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS <i>IVANA BURCAR DUNOVIĆ, MILJENKO ANTIĆ, MLADEN RADUJKOVIĆ</i>	49
RISK ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT ON PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS (PPP) IN SERBIA <i>GORAN CIROVIC, SIMO SUDIC, SNEZANA MITROVIC</i>	56
HOTEL LONE IN TOWN ROVINJ, CROATIA <i>MILAN CRNOGORAC, IVAN KALAFATIĆ, VEDRAN KobašLIĆ</i>	64
DEFICIENCIES OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN FIRE PROTECTION STANDARDS AND THE PROBLEMS WITH INTERNATIONAL REINSURANCE COMPANIES <i>ADNAN DELIC, CHRISTOPH M. ACHAMMER</i>	72
EFFECT OF FUELS FROM A PETROL STATION UPON ENVIRONMENT <i>BISERKA DIMSKOVSKA</i>	81
TYOLOGICAL METHODS OF MARKET SEGMENTATION AS A KEY PRESUMPTION FOR THE SUCCESSFUL MANAGEMENT OF CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS <i>RADEK DOHNAL, JITKA CHOVANCOVÁ</i>	92
OPTIMIZATION IN THE CHOICE OF BUILDING MECHANIZATION <i>JASMINA DRAŽIĆ, MILAN TRIVUNIĆ, VLADIMIR MUĆENSKI, IGOR PEŠKO, ALEKSANDAR NIKOLIĆ</i>	102
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATION'S RISK MANAGEMENT AS A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT <i>COSMIN FILIP, MIRELA POPA</i>	113
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROCESS OF MANAGING RISK <i>COSMIN FILIP, MIRELA POPA</i>	122
AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND URBAN ECONOMY: SMART CITIES AND THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY <i>JÚLIUS GOLEJ</i>	131
SPECIFICITIES OF CROATIAN CONSTRUCTION CONTRACT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE IN PROGRESS BILLINGS AND PAYMENTS SUB-PROCESS <i>IVONA GUDAC, IVAN MAROVIĆ, DRAŽEN BOŠKOVIĆ</i>	137
ENVIRONMENTAL EVALUATION OF ENERGY-SAVING MEASURES – A CASE STUDY <i>TOMÁŠ HANÁK, PAVLA DOSEDĚLOVÁ</i>	147
EVALUATION OF FRICTION COEFFICIENT EFFICIENCY BETWEEN ELASTOMERIC BEARING PAD AND CONCRFTE IN PRE-STRESSED CONCRETE BOX BRIDGES <i>EHSAN HASSANI NEZHAD GASHTI, JAVAD RAZZAGHI LANGROUDI, KAUKO KUJALA</i>	154

KNOWLEDGE MAP SUPPORTING MANAGEMENT IN CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES <i>BOŽENA HOĽA, ANDRZEJ POLAK, WIKTOR GRONOWICZ</i>	164
COMPUTER SIMULATION AND NOISE MITIGATION ON CONSTRUCTION SITES AND IN THEIR SURROUNDINGS <i>VÁCLAV HRAZDIL</i>	173
SUPPORT OF "GREEN" ENERGY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC <i>VÍT HROMÁDKA, JANA KORYTÁROVÁ, EVA VÍTKOVÁ</i>	180
THE 3-PARAMETER PACKING DENSITY MODEL WITH THE WEDGING EFFECT INCORPORATED <i>KA WAI CHAN, ALBERT K.H. KWAN, VIVIAN WONG</i>	188
SUSTAINABILITY ASPECTS OF THE CONTRACTUAL SAVINGS SCHEME <i>KOLOMAN IVANČKA, JÚLIUS GOLEJ, MIROSLAV PÁNIK</i>	198
SUSTAINABILITY IN BUILDING CONSTRUCTION <i>RÓBERT JANISS, DANIELA ŠPIRKOVÁ</i>	208
THE EFFECT OF DIAMETER AND LENGTH-TO-DIAMETER RATIO ON THE COMPRESSIVE STRENGTH OF CONCRETE CORES <i>KILINC KADIR, AHMET OZAN CELIK, MUSTAFA TUNCAN, AHMET TUNCAN</i>	219
SHEAR WALL BUILDINGS, CONFLICTS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND EUROPEAN STANDARD FOR DESIGN OF STRUCTURES IN SEISMIC ZONES <i>IVAN KALAFATIĆ, MILAN CRNOGORAC, ANA ŠIMOVIĆ</i>	230
USE OF SPECIAL STEEL BRACING SYSTEMS IN REINFORCED CONCRETE STRUCTURES <i>TASKIN KIVANC, NESRIN YARDIMCI, H. FARUK KARADOGAN</i>	238
CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING FOR INTERNATIONAL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS <i>SERKAN KIVRAK, GOKHAN ARSLAN, MUSTAFA TUNCAN, HAKAN KELES</i>	248
THE ISSUE OF INNOVATION IN THE INITIATION OF CURRENT CONSTRUCTION PRACTICE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC <i>GABRIELA KOCOURKOVÁ</i>	257
METALLIC L SHAPED DAMPER USING ON BEAM TO COLUMN CONNECTIONS OF STEEL FRAMES <i>MEHMET ALPASLAN KÖROĞLU, ALI KÖKEN</i>	263
EU REGIONAL POLICY INFLUENCE ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC FROM 2014 TO 2020 <i>LUCIE KOZUMPLÍKOVÁ, JANA KORYTÁROVÁ</i>	270
EXPERIENCES IN DESIGNING OF REHABILITATION WORKS FOR NORTH-SOUTH RAILWAY LINE IN MONTENEGRO <i>ZORAN KRAKUTOVSKI, MILOŠ KNEŽEVIĆ, ZLATKO ZAFIROVSKI, MERI CVETKOVSKA</i>	280
POST DISASTER MANAGEMENT OF BUILDING REFURBISHMENT ON URBAN AND BUILDING SCALE: EARTHQUAKE DAMAGE MITIGATION <i>MATEJ KUŠAR, MOJCA JARC SIMONIĆ, JANA ŠELIH</i>	289

SURVEY ON LEARNING CURVE IN ROOF INSULATION <i>LEVENTE MÁLYUSZ, ATTILA PÉM</i>	296
MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WEBSITE AS ELECTRONIC BUSINESS COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR CONSULTING FIRMS <i>REHAN MASOOD, MUHAMMAD ALI KHAN, FAHIM HAIDER, MUHAMMAD ZULFIQAR ALI KHAN</i> ...	304
MEASURING CONTENT OF VISION STATEMENT FOR IMAGING FUTURE <i>REHAN MASOOD, AHSEN MAQSOOM, MAHMMOD ELLAHI, MUHAMMAD ALI KHAN</i>	312
TESTS OF MOISTURE CONTENT IN BRICK WALLS OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY BAROQUE BUILDING <i>ZYGMUNT MATKOWSKI, ADELAJDA PALA</i>	321
RISKS IN INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS AND BIM AS A RISK AVOIDING TECHNIQUE - SERBIAN MARKET SURVEY <i>MILJAN MIKIĆ, DRAGAN ARIZANOVIĆ, NENAD IVANIŠEVIĆ</i>	331
PERMITTING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF CONSTRUCTION IN THE COMPARATION OF GEODETIC ACTIVITIES <i>MICHAL PAULÍK, ROBERT GEISSE, MIKULÁŠ ŠVEDA</i>	341
EVALUATION AND SELECTION OF BUILDING CONTRACTORS BY PUBLIC CLIENTS IN POLAND <i>EDYTA PLEBANKIEWICZ, AGNIESZKA LEŚNIAK</i>	350
TIME-COST OPTIMIZATION OF A CONSTRUCTION PROJECT BY GENETIC ALGORITHM <i>NATAŠA PRAŠČEVIĆ, ŽIVOJIN PRAŠČEVIĆ</i>	359
MODELLING POST-TENSIONED SLABS USING KINEMATIC CONNECTIONS <i>PREDRAG PRESEČKI, MILJENKO KOVAČ, BOŽO SOLDO</i>	366
CONSTRUCTION MARKET INTEGRATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS – CASE OF CEE REGION <i>JOSIP SERTIC, IVICA ZAVRSKI, HANSI HAUTAMÄKI</i>	373
POSSIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF CONSTRUCTION WASTE DISPOSAL WITH PROJECT LIFE-CYCLE <i>MARCELA SPIŠÁKOVÁ, MÁRIA KOZLOVSKÁ</i>	381
EFFECT OF MANUFACTURING TECHNOLOGY ON QUALITY OF SLABS MADE OF REGULAR CONCRETE <i>BOHDAN STAWISKI, TOMASZ KANIA</i>	391
ECONOMIC INCENTIVES TO IMPROVE OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH PERFORMANCE <i>ZUZANA STRUKOVÁ, MÁRIA KOZLOVSKÁ</i>	401
IMPACT OF VALUE MANAGEMENT AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE APPLICATION ON THE SUSTAINABLE CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IN WESTERN BALKANS <i>NEBOJSA SURLAN, ZORAN CEKIC</i>	411
CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENTS TO CREATE MORE ENERGY EFFICIENT CONSTRUCTION PROCESS AND BUILDING OPERATION <i>KRISTIÁN SZEKERES</i>	417

PARTNERING IN CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS – STEP BY STEP <i>SRDJAN TOPALOVIC, DRAGAN ARIZANOVIC</i>	425
STREET LIGHTING IN THE TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF CRETE CAMPUS <i>ANDRONIKI TSOUCHARAKI, GEORGE ACHILLEOS, KONSTANTINOS ATSAKAKIS</i>	436
FLOW-SHOP SCHEDULES IN CONSTRUCTION <i>ZOLTÁN ANDRÁS VATTAI</i>	445
MANAGING CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS THROUGH 4D PERSPECTIVE: GALA 2012 – PROJECT MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE <i>MLADEN VUKOMANOVIĆ, MLADEN RADUJKOVIĆ, MAJA MARIJA NAHOD</i>	455
CREATING MODELS FOR PROJECTS IMPROVING THE THERMAL-TECHNICAL PROPERTIES OF BUILDINGS – THEORETICAL BASIS <i>MILOSLAV VÝSKALA</i>	466
A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF CONCRETE <i>VIVIAN WONG, ALBERT K.H. KWAN, KA WAI CHAN</i>	474
LEGISLATIVE CONDITIONS OF PROPRIETARY HOUSING IN RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC <i>JANA ZAJACOVÁ</i>	484
PROBLEMS THAT OCCUR DURING CONSTRUCTION PROJECT REALIZATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA <i>VALENTINA ŽILESKA-PANČOVSKA, SNEŽANA RISTEVSKA-JOVANOVSKA, GORAN MIJOSKI, TOMÁŠ HANÁK</i>	495

SECTION II: WATER MANAGEMENT AND WATER STRUCTURES

THE EFFECT OF PH INFLUENCE ON THE RELEASE OF HEAVY METALS FROM CONTAMINATED SEDIMENT <i>MAGDALÉNA BÁLINTOVÁ, MARIÁN HOLUB, PETRA PAVLIKOVÁ</i>	508
NON-INTRUSIVE METHODS FOR MEASURING THRESHOLD OF PARTICLE MOVEMENT AND PRESSURES ON A ROUGH BED <i>AHMET OZAN CELIK, PANAYIOTIS DIPLAS</i>	514
HOUSEHOLD WATER CONSUMPTION IN TURKEY: AN APPLICATION OF DATA MINING <i>MUHARREM DÜĞENCI, FILIZ ERSÖZ</i>	522
MEASUREMENT OF RADON LEVELS IN THERMAL WATERS OF KONYA, TURKEY <i>MEHMET ERDOĞAN, FATİH ÖZDEMİR, NURETDİN EREN</i>	531
SCOUR AT ENGINEERING STRUCTURES UNDER STRATIFIED BED: DEVELOPMENT IN TIME <i>JELENA GOVSHA, BORISS GJUNSBURGS</i>	538
MULTIPLE FLOOD AS THE CAUSE OF FAILURE OF ENGINEERING STRUCTURES IN RIVER FLOWS <i>GINTS JAUDZEMS, BORISS GJUNSBURGS, JELENA GOVSHA</i>	548
IMPROVING THE MANAGEMENT OF RAPID SAND FILTRATION PROCESS THROUGH MODELING <i>SUVADA JUSIC</i>	558
ERLANG DISTRIBUTION FOR THE WATER ROBOT <i>VLADIMIR KRIŽAIĆ</i>	566
SOIL WATER EROSION DEGREES IN BANJA LUKA AREA <i>MIHAJLO MARKOVIC, MILANA MISIC, BORIS MARKOVIC, HAMID CUSTOVIC</i>	571
EQUILIBRIUM SCOUR STAGE AT THE STRAIGHT GUIDE BANKS IN PLAIN RIVERS <i>ROBERTS NEILANDS, BORISS GJUNSBURGS, JELENA GOVSHA, ROMANS NEILANDS</i>	580
CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE COMPOSING OF HYDRAULIC SCHEMES FOR MULTIPURPOSE USE OF WATER RESOURCES <i>LJUPCHO PETKOVSKI, STEVCHO MITOVSKI</i>	591
LANDFILL LEACHATE CHARACTERISATION AND TREATMENT WITH MEMBRANE TECHNOLOGY <i>AMRA SERDAREVIC</i>	601
FLOOD PROTECTION MEASURES ON THE ENNS RIVER <i>GEORG SCHUSTER, THOMAS PFAFFENWIMMER, GEROLD HEPP, AHMED M. MOUSSA, CEDOMIL J. JUGOVIC</i>	612
USING POLLUTION LOAD INDEX FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF HEAVY METALS POLLUTION OF SEDIMENT IN THE SMOLNIK CREEK IN SLOVAKIA <i>EVA SINGOVSKÁ, MAGDALÉNA BÁLINTOVÁ</i>	623

APPLIED OF SATELLITE REMOTE SENSING DATA AND GIS IN SOIL EROSION AND CRITICAL LAND ANALYSES <i>AGUS SUHARYANTO</i>	628
FLOOD PROTECTION MEASURES IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA <i>MARIJA ŠPERAC, ANAMARIJA RABI</i>	638
A MULTICRITERIA FLOOD HAZARD ASSESSMENT IN THE SELECTED COUNTRIES <i>MARTINA ZELEŇÁKOVÁ, LENKA GAŇOVÁ</i>	645
ASSESSMENT OF STRESSORS IN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROCESS <i>LENKA ZVIJÁKOVÁ, MARTINA ZELEŇÁKOVÁ</i>	652
NUMERICAL MODELING OF SUSPENDED SEDIMENT PROPAGATION IN SMALL TORRENTS <i>ELVIS ŽIC, NENAD BIČANIĆ, TOMASZ KOZIARA, NEVENKA OŽANIĆ</i>	660

SECTION III: LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

URBAN LANDSCAPES IN TRANSYLVANIAN VEDUTISM <i>IULIA CIANGĂ</i>	672
APPROACHES TO THE FLOOD-CONTROL MEASURES IN THE MAJOR SLOVAK RIVERS IN THE PAST AND PRESENT <i>MÁRIA ĎURECHOVÁ</i>	683
GARDENING EXHIBITIONS IN EUROPE – THEIR HISTORY AND INFLUENCE ON THE SHAPING OF GREEN AREAS <i>ANNA HOĽA</i>	692
BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTALLY COMPLIANT STRUCTURES FOR PEOPLE <i>THOMAS MACOUN, ULRICH LETH</i>	700
EARLY STUDY ON FACTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF INDOOR PLANTS AND INDOOR NOISE LEVELS <i>CHRISTINA EVTUTAMI MEDIASTIKA, FLORIBERTA BINARTI, LAURENSIA INDAH MURWANI YULIANTI</i>	710
MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING OF VISITORS IN THE PRŮHONICE PARK (CZECH REPUBLIC) <i>LUÍS MONTEIRO</i>	719
THE APPLICATION OF GROUP DISCRIMINATION TECHNIQUES TO PREDICT THE POTENTIAL DISTRIBUTION OF TURPENTINE TREE <i>KÜRŞAD ÖZKAN, ÖZDEMİR ŞENTÜRK</i>	728
AESTHETIC REQUIREMENTS FOR BRIDGE PIERS <i>ILZE ROZENTALE, AINARS PAEGLITIS</i>	737
REVIVAL OF PEDESTRIAN SPACES IN PALIMPSEST CITIES APPROACHES – CASE OF STUDIES: YAZD AND FLORENCE <i>MOJGAN SADEGHI BENIS, MOHAMMAD MOTALLEBI</i>	747
LANDSCAPE AND GREEN ROOFS: KINDERGARTEN ARCHITECTURE <i>DANICA STANKOVIC, MILAN TANIC, VUK MILOSEVIC</i>	756
TRACES OF HISTORICAL UTILIZATION OF LANDSCAPE FOOTHILLS OF BLANSKÝ LES <i>MARIE ŽVAKOVÁ, JITKA FIALOVÁ</i>	765

SECTION IV: UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND LEARNING OF CIVIL ENGINEERING

AN EVALUATION OF CIVIL ENGINEERING EDUCATION IN TURKEY FROM THE STUDENTS' POINT OF VIEW

GÜLÇAĞ ALBAYRAK, İLKER ÖZDEMİR, UĞUR ALBAYRAK 778

INTERACTION BETWEEN PATHOLOGY AND TECHNOLOGY OF BUILDINGS

NAĐA ANTOŠOVÁ 787

TEACHING EXPERIENCE – ON-SITE LECTURES AND ON-SITE EXPERIENCE

VJERAN MLINARIĆ, ZDRAVKO LINARIĆ, ZVONKO SIGMUND 793

APPLICATION OF MODERN METHODS OF PHOTOGRAMMETRY AND SOFTWARE PACKAGES IN TEACHING

OLIVERA NIKOLIĆ, PETAR PEJIĆ, SONJA KRASIĆ, VLADAN NIKOLIĆ 799

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROCODES IN TEACHING PROCESS AND DESIGN PRACTICE IN LATVIA

LEONIDS PAKRASTINSH, LIGA GAILE, BORISS GJUNSBURGS 805

DETERMINING THE CONSTRUCTION PIT SHAPE AND SIZE FOR THE WATER RESERVOIR DRAGONOŽEC – A STUDENT'S FINAL WORK

BORIS UREMOVIĆ, MIRELA KATIĆ-ŽLEPALO, BORIS KRAJAČIĆ 816

EARLY STUDY ON FACTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF INDOOR PLANTS AND INDOOR NOISE LEVELS

Christina Eviutami Mediastika¹, Floriberta Binarti², Laurensia Indah Murwani Yulianti³

Abstract

Two types of plants were used in a study to see employee perceptions and facts of plants in reducing indoor noise level, i.e. *Sansevieria trifasciata* and *Scindapsus* sp. Each type were planted in containers and placed inside cubicles of two offices. The noise levels were measured using sound level meters and taken in 3 periods, i.e. without plants, with *Sansevieria*, and with *Scindapsus* in place. Questionnaire surveys among employees and leaves' absorption coefficient (α) measurement were also conducted. Both leaves showed significant α at high sound frequencies, i.e. 0.6. But, the meters showed very insignificant noise difference before and after plantings, i.e. only 3 dB with no regard of plant types. Fluctuation of 3 dB is hardly noticed by human hearing instruments. Whilst, the surveys showed contradictory results, 60% (1st office) and 22% (2nd office) of employees agreed that noise level was lowered after plantings. These showed that indoor plants might create more pleasant environment for employees to feel undisturbed by noise, where actually the noise remained at similar levels.

Key words

Cubicle rooms, employee perception, indoor plants, noise levels.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The use of plants as elements of built environment and building design has long been known, especially within the last 30 years, where architect include plants in their design either for outdoor or indoor decorations. It is usually aimed to create aesthetic aspect of given conditions. Some are also to function as lungs to absorb pollution [1] and to create more comfortable microclimatic conditions [2]. Studies on the usage of greenery in the indoor environment with function to reduce indoor pollution have shown a prospective result [3,4]. Here, researchers suggest the use of particular type of indoor plants; i.e. those with little maintenance, such as ability to live with minimum sun exposure and water. One of the suggested is snake plant or in scientific named as *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii* [5], which is a kind of robust plants.

Apart from capability of absorbing indoor pollutant, some people also believe that plants are capable of reducing the intrusion of outdoor noise into the interior space. However, some are still unconvinced [6]. This negative opinion is supported by theories which explain that plants has no capability on reducing noise based on the fact that plants has never become a complete solid and dense material as is required for noise insulation [7]. However, it is true that plants may absorb or impede noise propagation [8]. Hence, it is predicted that plants work better within indoor environment to overcome indoor background noise problem which level and vibration is lesser than those occur outdoor. Air and objects within indoor environment are also easier to control and usually are in steady condition that will minimise noise reduction affecting factors.

Open-plan office divided into numbers of cubicles was chosen as role model . Each cubicle in this office suffers from indoor background noise, since one cubicle cannot entirely block sound transmission from other cubicles. There are options to stop noise dispersion using absorbent linings, such as thick carpets, hanging ceilings and porous walls. Despite using these conventional materials, usage of indoor plants to lower indoor background noise in open-plan office is proposed here. It is expected that indoor plants will perform as absorbent linings and can be used either by itself or in conjunction with conventional absorbent linings. The use of indoor plants will also benefit in the improvement of indoor air [3] and to more general global warming issue. User opinions on noise levels before and after installation of greenery were also to be studied.

2 OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to see any positive correlations between user perceptions and facts regarding the use of indoor plants, particularly *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii* and *Scindapsus sp* to reduce indoor background noise levels (qualitative aspects).

3 THEORETICAL APPROACH

Plants consist of leaves which has unique surface with stoma and delicate hair [9]. These are just similar to properties of material used to absorb sound, such as soft surface perforated panels. However, since stoma and hair are very delicate, it will only work for high frequency noise, i.e. noise that is not entitled of vibration. The small porous surfaces provide high frequency absorption [10]. A study by Costa [8], showed that particular indoor plants were capable of absorbing sound as shown by Table 1.

Tab. 1) Absorption Coefficient Provided by Particular Indoor Plants [8]

Plant species	Absorption Coefficients					
	Sound Frequency (Hz)					
	125	250	500	1000	2000	4000
<i>Ficus benjamina</i>	0.06	0.06	0.10	0.19	0.22	0.57
<i>Howea forsteriana</i>	0.21	0.11	0.09	0.22	0.11	0.08
<i>Dracaena fragrans</i>	0.13	0.14	0.12	0.12	0.16	0.11
<i>Spathiphyllum wallisii</i>	0.09	0.07	0.08	0.13	0.22	0.44
<i>Dracaena marginata</i>	0.13	0.03	0.16	0.08	0.14	0.47
<i>Schefflera arboricola</i>	-	0.13	0.06	0.22	0.23	0.47
<i>Philodendron scandens</i>	-	0.23	0.22	0.29	0.34	0.72

This research shows that plants are generally more efficient in absorbing high frequency sound. This is because sound at low frequencies are of longer wavelength [11] which could not be absorb by such tiny leaf and stoma. Leaf is also a non solid material which usually used to absorb sound of low frequencies .

The plants studied by Costa showed promising absorption coefficient. However, they mostly request careful maintenance [12]. *Ficus benjamina* need to be kept in specific level of humidity and particular level of light so not to cause leaf turning yellow. *Howea forsteriana* also need careful watering and particular light level for growing. Both *Dracaena* (*fragrans* and *marginata*) are robust plants, but they may grow more then 3 m tall, so it will only suit offices with high ceilings. *Spathiphyllum wallisii* need sufficient indirect light to borne its beautiful flower. *Schefflera arboricola* need careful maintenance, such as light, water and pruning. *Philodendron scandens* is a kind of climbing plants thus will need frames for further growing. It is not saying that all those kind of plants are not worth it to be utilized indoor, but there is another kind of plants which is more robust and almost free maintenance, which is called *Sansevieria trifasciata* (refer to Figure 1). Beside its robustness and minimum maintenance, unlike other plants that release CO₂ at night, this *Sansiviera* converts CO₂ into O₂ [13]. So it is safe to be kept within offices that expand their working period up to night time. There are about 600 types of *Sansevieria* around the world, but the most famous is *Sansevieria trifasciata*, which is also commonly known as snake plants. Its origin is Western Africa. There are some types of *Sansiviera trifasciata* (about 18 types), among the famous are *laurentii*, *hahnii*, and *golden hahnii*.

As a member of cactus plants family, *Sansevieria trifasciata* does not demand on water. Although originally comes from Western Africa, a region with abundance solar, *Sansevieria trifasciata* does not demand on excessive solar light. It can be put indoor, even in a remote area from transparent windows. Indeed, it does need to be placed outdoors for sun exposure, but this can be done merely once every week or once every two weeks at the longest [12]. Stiff leaves of *Sansevieria trifasciata* will not easily fade and change color so they will be charming most of the time. In particular, *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii* has slim and tall posture; a perfect posture to block sound dispersion. As a comparison, *Philodendron scandens* was also planned to be studied here. The reason in using *Philodendron scandens* is because this offers greatest absorption coefficient among the measured plants as is shown by Table 1. It also does not require any specific indoor climatic condition unless frames for further growing. Leaves of *Philodendron scandens* which is thin, soft, and round shaped may also be compared to leaves of *Sansevieria trifasciata* which is thick, stiff and ribbon alike shaped.

However, within very limited natural resources, it was difficult to prepare the Philo, therefore, *Scindapsus* sp (refer to Figure 2) which has similar characteristic to those of Philo and widely available was then used to substitute.



Fig. 1) *Sansciviera trifasciata laurentii*



Fig. 2) *Scindapsus* sp

4 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted as empirical study by field research, which is a comprehensive between qualitative and quantitative aspects. People working in two offices are the focus of this study. Type of offices to study is limited to open-plan office divided into numbers of cubicle, where one cubicle may suffer noise from adjacent or far cubicles. It is also limited to offices that do not use any absorbent linings such as carpets, or porous ceilings and walls. Administration office of Faculty of Engineering of Atma Jaya Yogyakarta University (AJYU,

refer to Figure 3) and Design Graphics dan Mechanical Engineering office of PT. Alstom Power Indonesia, Surabaya (refer to Figure 4) and their employees, were the focus of this study. Noise perception and expectation of these types of workers are to be analysed, in order to see the its correlation to indoor noise levels before and after installation of plants.

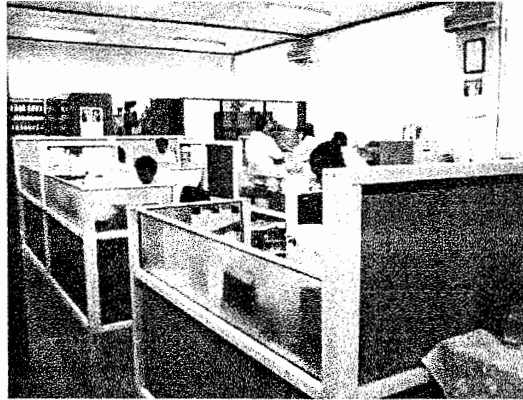


Fig. 3) Administration office of AJYU



Fig. 4) Design Graphics dan Mechanical Engineering office of PT. Alstom

At the first stage, existing noise levels within the two office were studied. The investigation processes in this level may be grouped as follows:

- Measurements of existing background noise levels.
- Data collection (questionnaire surveys and interviews) of employees perception and expectation on the existing background noise.
- Laboratory measurement of leaves' absorption coefficient.

At the second stage, *Sansevieria trifasciata* plants are placed in the offices. One medium container (contains of approximately 8 mature plants of 80 cm height, as in Figure 1) of *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii* is placed in each cubicle. Minimum area of a cubicle in an office is 1,2 m² [14]. After placement of plants, measurements, questionnaire surveys and interviews were again conducted.

At the third stage, *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii* was substituted by *Scindapsus* sp. One medium container (contains of approximately 80 cm height, as in Figure 2) of *Scindapsus* sp is placed in each cubicle. In AJYU office there were 10 employees stays in 10 cubicles, so

there were 10 containers of each type of plants placed for the entire office. Whilst in Alstom office, 34 containers of each type of plants to fit within 34 cubicles for 34 employees. From here, we could learn whether there is any indoor background noise reduction after placing this particular plants, and whether it is match to office employees perceptions and expectations.

5 QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEYS RESULT

All employees within the room of both AJYU and Alstom were respondents for interviews and questionnaire surveys. Both at AJYU and Alstom, 90% of the employees are male, which caused difficulty in describing whether there was any different opinion between male and female. Thus the gender factors were disregarded. Comprehensive answers of the questionnaire is presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2) Questionnaire Results

No.	Item	AJYU office	Alstom office
1.	Age	between 36 to 55 years of age	between 25 to 50 years of age
2.	Duration of employments in the offices	varies from under 1 year - over 5 years	varies from under 1 year - 3 years
3.	Opinion on the existing background noise levels	80% said 'fair' 20% said 'too much/over the standard'	75% said 'fair' 25% said 'too much/over the standard'
4.	Opinion on the disturbance levels	80% said 'no disturbance' 20% said 'sometimes difficult to focus on work'	78% said 'no disturbance' 22% said 'sometimes difficult to focus on work'
5.	Expectation of further conditions to the office room	80% suggested the room to be renovated 20% said nothing (abstain)	72% suggested the room to be renovated 28% said nothing (abstain)
6.	Basic knowldge on plants as noise reduction materials	50% knew about it 50% knew nothing	40% knew about it 60% knew nothing
7.	Further expectation on the use of plants to reduce indoor noise levels	70% believes plants will do the task 30% knew nothing	44% believes plants will do the task 56% knew nothing
8.	Part of plants that may reduce noise levels	60% said leaves 40% knew nothing	50% said leaves 50% knew nothing
9.	Plants creates better visualization	80% agreed 20% felt distracted	65% agreed 35% felt no difference
10.	Opinion on noise reduction	60% agreed on noise reduction after placement of plants 40% disagreed	22% agreed on noise reduction after placement of plants 78% disagreed
11.	Opinion on plants was reducing indoor noise levels (from those who agrees on item number10)	75% noise reduction was caused by plants 25% noise reduction was caused by other factors	73% noise reduction was caused by plants 27% noise reduction was caused by other factors

6 INDOOR NOISE LEVELS AND ABSORPTION COEFFICIENT OF LEAVES

Indoor background noise levels were collected in 3 groups of time using Sound Level Metres (SLM) DEKO – SL 130 digital. The SLM was set in an A-weighting network. The 3 groups, i.e. existing noise conditions, after installation of *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii*, and after installation of *Scindapsus sp.* Each group of data collecting was conducted for 3 working days during working hours. However, 30 minutes after the working hour starts and 30 minutes before the working hour ends were not recorded, considering non steady noise levels caused by transition time of employees entering and leaving the room. There were 3 different measurement positions within each office to collect the average background noise levels,

using 3 SLM. The collected data were then calculated into L_{eq} values. The L_{eq} represents equivalent background noise levels during 3 groups of time measurement and 3 days-each of groups. Since the data was recorded every second, there were thousands of values collected. Here, will only be reported the final data after calculated into L_{eq} . Both at AJYU and Alstom offices, there were no significant difference on noise levels between existing condition and after the use of *Sansevieria trifasciata laurentii* and *Scindapsus* sp. There was noise reduction after placement of plants which varies from 0,33 to 3,94 dBA. However, the difference between plants was so small, i.e. below 1 dBA. At Alstom, the condition was worse, i.e. no noise levels difference between existing and after use of plants (all differences was below 1 dBA).

On one hand, the insignificant noise levels differences in both offices showed that there was no impact on using indoor plants to reduce indoor noise. On the other hand, the laboratory measurement of leaves' absorption coefficient using impedance tube, showed a promising result, especially for frequency of 2000 Hz onwards as is shown by Table 3.

Tab. 3) Absorption Coefficient of *Sansevieria* and *Scindapsus* leaves

Frequency Band	<i>Sansevieria</i> (α_1)	<i>Scindapsus</i> (α_2)
250	0.156	0.137
315	0.095	0.125
400	0.166	0.182
500	0.228	0.242
630	0.306	0.261
800	0.195	0.216
1000	0.210	0.301
1250	0.251	0.417
1600	0.261	0.275
2000	0.411	0.633
2500	0.309	0.300
3150	0.617	0.539
4000	0.493	0.680
5000	0.477	0.531

Table 3 shows that leaves with their delicate hair and stoma absorb sound better at high frequencies, as was reported by Costa [8] and Harris [10], that small porous surfaces provide high frequency absorption. However, this was not correlate to the findings that the use of plants has insignificant effect on indoor noise reduction, which means leaves barely absorb noise. This might means that the indoor noise of the two offices were mostly of low frequencies or the number of containers of plants should be increased. The increase of plants may not be a good option since some respondents have said to be distracted by placement of plants.

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the interview and questionnaire collected, we learn that although major respondents quote that indoor noise levels can be accepted, they were still expecting on room renovation to improve indoor noise levels quality. There was noise levels difference between before and after the placement of plants, and between the use of *Sansevieria* and *Scindapsus*. However, these are too small to be noticed by human hearing instruments [15]. This means that employee opinions of plants reducing indoor noise (60% of AJYU office and 22 % of Alstom

office) were only a perception which might be supported by their prior knowledge on plants capabilities to reduce pollution including noise.

From this study we may learn that people opinion on the use of plants were masking by their prior knowledge which is actually did not correlate to the facts showed by field measurements of the indoor noise levels. According to leaves' absorption coefficient measurement, the use of plants to absorb sound is recommended for higher frequencies. This correlate to that of Costa [8] and thus for further study, the indoor noise frequencies of particular room need to be studied prior to the use of plants.

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