



Eco-luxe is the new buzz phrase that has top designers mixing style with sustainability. With a plethora of eco products and technologies, it's not hard to create a welcoming home that minimises harm — to you and the environment. By Christine Paul

Recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reveal a growing number of households in Australia are adopting energy-conservation measures such as insulation, energy-saving lights and off-peak hot-water systems. But such moves are driven more by lifestyle choices than by a genuine desire to cut energy use.

"We found that the use of conservation measures such as insulation, installation of heaters and window treatments was mainly to attain comfort and convenience rather than benefits from energy reduction and cost savings," says Dr Michael Vardon, ABS Director, Centre of Environment and Energy Statistics.

It was also found that most Australians continue to live in houses with three or more bedrooms and there's an increased acquisition of household appliances, mainly air conditioners, dishwashers, DVD players and games consoles. Philip Ross, a builder and carpenter for more than 30 years, feels the response to the push for greener measures is not as encouraging.

"Despite BASIX and the Green Building Council's call for tougher energy-saving targets for new homes, most new homeowners don't seem to be in a rush to go green. Existing homeowners who are renovating seem to pay only lip service," he says. "The funny thing is many people who are in the best position to afford environmentally friendly products don't seem to be interested. Instead, they want to keep on building huge, resource-eating monoliths for themselves," he adds.

If green is the new black, why is it that most of us are fairly slow to implement greener practices and technology in our homes? Does it have anything to do with the preconceived notion of green equating with a hairshirt-wearing lifestyle? If style, comfort and convenience are motivating forces behind our decision to go green, the good news is today there are numerous options with that feel-good factor.

Going green begins at home

Geoff Fitzpatrick of Design Institute of Australia believes, although the move towards stylish eco interiors is well underway in the corporate sector, the focus is still lacking in residential environments.

"Traditionally, the corporate built environment has led the way with its adoption of well-designed environmentally sustainable development (ESD). However, in Australia there's still some resistance towards full implementation of the green message in homes," explains Fitzpatrick.

Sustainability Victoria is working with the institute to encourage stylish, sustainable practice in corporate and residential sectors. "Our focus is to show the way in using our resources more efficiently and reducing our everyday environmental impacts," says its project manager, Paul Pitrone. "We work with the community, business and government to create a more sustainable future. More often than not, this starts in the home."

Pitrone continues, "The built environment is responsible for contributing to 30 per cent of all emissions and 60 per cent of this is from the household sector. Education is the key here. If you're building a new home or renovating an existing one, it's important to know what sustainable options are available. We need to be resource-smart and mindful of the choices and this doesn't mean we have to sacrifice style or comfort.

"Consider buying furnishing products that contain a percentage of recycled material. This reduces the demand for natural resources. Whether it's low VOC paint or environmentally friendly appliances, there are many eco products out there designed to create sustainable environments that also look stylish."

For new homebuyers seeking information about greener home choices, Sustainability Victoria in collaboration with other organisations across Australia has recently released a brochure *Your Home Buyer's Guide*, available online. "It's not just a green guide. It's been written specifically for the mass market and is saturated with stylish sustainability tips," he adds.

Green and glamorous designs

The concept of stylish sustainability has kicked off in the US. New York-based Q Collection aims to introduce Americans to furniture and fabrics that are environmentally friendly and fashionable at the same time. Founder Jesse Johnson opened his flagship showroom in 2004 and has received rave reviews in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, hailing it as one of the leaders in the trend toward green design.

The company offers 17 furniture designs and dozens of fabrics in a wide palette of colours. It also offers a competitive price, thereby appealing to designers and architects who might not have otherwise considered these products. Johnson is quick to point out that, while a number of celebrities have inquired about purchasing environmentally friendly sofas and chairs, the whole point of the venture is what many have called the "double bottom-line".

"By offering green home furnishings at a competitive price point, we are able to define this market and at the same time create a healthier and more sustainable environment," he says. The Q collection pledges, among other things, that all wood finishes do not contain polyurethane, wood glues are formaldehyde-free and all woods are FSC-certified.

In Australia, the trend toward merging style with sustainability has been less dramatic. The Subiaco Sustainable Demonstration Home in Subiaco in Perth hopes to set an example. As part of a collaborative project between the City of Subiaco, state government departments, universities and business sponsors, the house was built to teach the local community principles of sustainable design and construction.

It was designed by Griff Morris and Ken Wibberley of Solar Dwellings in association with Dr Elizabeth Karol. Homeowners, renovators, community groups and school children can visit the house and learn about passive solar design, energy and water efficiency and other ideas that can reduce the cost of the home to both the owner and the environment.

Costing around \$300,000, the house was built on the site of an old cement factory with new and recycled materials. Morris explains it's intended to look just like any other house. "People sometimes have the idea that a passive solar, sustainable house will look somewhat nuts-and-berries with bush poles and the like," he says. "Probably the single most important feature of the house is its ambience," he adds.

"It has been monitored for thermal performance and has performed spectacularly well as a purpose-built, energy-efficient home. So it will certainly save its occupants many dollars over the years and may even earn them some (when excess power is sold back to the main grid). But, more than that, it has a really wonderful feel to it. In summer, it's delightfully cool without that horrible air conditioned feel, and in winter it's naturally warm," he enthuses. The house recycles grey water from the bathrooms and laundry through an underground Galvin system for distribution to the gardens. A 1300-litre compact rainwater tank has been installed on the site to collect water from the roof.

The model focuses on open space, natural lighting, green space, ventilation systems, glass, wood, roofing and light metals. "Smart, functional design is achievable and can be applied to any project regardless of scale or budget. If you incorporate some basic environmental design principles, you can build a home that uses a fraction of the energy and water the average home uses," says Morris.

For better homes

Experts say, even if you are not undertaking a major renovation or building a new home, there are still many simple ways you can make your home more sustainable. You can take green steps quite effortlessly with a save-a-flush system in the toilet, with an environmentally friendly paint or with furniture made from recyclable materials. Think of using natural stone for entrance halls and kitchens. Not only is it pleasing to the eye, but stone flooring lasts forever and, while the initial outlay might be steep, it will be cost-effective in the long run.



12 ways to a stylishly sustainable home

- Buy furniture made from reclaimed wood or renewable material such as palm wood or bamboo.
- Look for natural furnishings that have been or can be recycled such as tables made from reclaimed timber, organic cotton curtains or an organic wool duvet.
- Ensure furniture is formaldehyde-free. Use organic swatches.
- Use low-VOC paints or latex paint.
- For wall coverings, consider eco suede.
- For floorings, use recycled tile and carpet, rubber flooring and woods.
- Buy stylish and energy-saving helio pendant lamps.
- Use natural-fibre carpets.
- Use pebbles in the garden.
- Use beeswax candles.
- Add plants around the house. They look good and clean the air.
- In the garden, choose stylish native plants that are drought-tolerant. Add a birdbath and enjoy watching nature at work.



Quick ways to make the change

- Take reusable bags for shopping and refuse plastic bags.
- Install or top up insulation in ceilings.
- Start a compost heap.
- Take shorter showers. Make it less than five minutes instead of the average eight minutes.
- Switch appliances off at the power point wherever possible.
- Use your recycling bin and make sure you know what can be recycled.
- If you have air conditioning, set the thermostat to 18-20 in summer and 26 in winter.
- Buy products with less packaging.
- Install an AAA-rated showerhead and a dual-flush toilet.
- Buy energy-efficient appliances.

If you are not undertaking a major renovation or building a new home, there are still many simple ways you can make your home more sustainable.

Utility areas are often overlooked in terms of style. But where wood is used, a utility area can turn into something much better. Ask a skilled carpenter to carry out the work and you won't miss out on the aesthetics. Consider using sheep's wool insulation as it's more efficient and eco-friendly. As with many green options, the initial outlay is often greater, but the investment pays rich dividends.

Interior designer Sharon Hamilton, who runs eco company Your Abode in Sydney with partner Darryn Parkinson, believes most of the changes involve the use of products and materials that are in some way "invisible", so there is no compromise on style. "You can use low-VOC paints like Wattyl id or Dulux EnvirO2, which offer a full designer colour range and look no different from traditional paints," she says.

With board products, changing to low-formaldehyde-emission products — medium-density fibreboard (MDF) or plywoods and laminates — doesn't limit your options for achieving the look you want, she says. The Laminex Greenfirst product range is ideal. For floor finishes, she recommends using water-based low-emission products for timber flooring to achieve a durable surface that looks good. And, when it comes to carpets, you don't have to compromise your green credentials if you look at manufacturers that produce a low-emitting, natural-fibre carpet that will be recycled. Good examples are the Godfrey Hirst and Tufmaster ranges.

For furnishing fabrics, she suggests looking at natural fibres that are not treated with chemicals and using products and materials that are from sustainably managed sources. She recommends timbers that are FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) or equivalent certified. For gas heaters, always choose a flued appliance.

"As an interior designer, I have become increasingly aware that the products and materials we use in our interiors have a substantial effect on human health as well as the environment," Hamilton says. "There's a number of alternative materials where manufacturers have reduced or even eliminated harmful substances in the manufacturing process — for example, formaldehyde, solvents and PVC, which are not widely recognised or known by consumers."

Another area they focus on is indoor air quality. "Today's parents are concerned with their family's health and conscious of making the best choices wherever possible," says Parkinson. "What many of them overlook is the indoor environment and how that could affect their family's health. Creating a green interior should be thought about early on in the design process."

Perth's Subiaco Sustainable Demonstration Home, below and opposite page, merges sustainable design features, such as solar panels and water tanks, with visually appealing, modern construction.



"Statistically, the time people spend at home can range from 68 per cent (for 15- to 24-year-olds) to nearly 90 per cent (over 65s). So it's vital that when people are indoors they are not exposing themselves to an unhealthy environment," he adds. After all, a good environmental design is all about creating spaces that are healthy and stylish to live in as well as being good for the environment.

Words of a green guru

Jenny Bonnin, director of Clean Up Australia and Clean Up the World and co-author of *True Green: 100 Everyday Ways You Can Contribute to a Healthier Planet*, says, "Since the launch of the book, we have been inundated with questions from readers about what they can do at their workplace, so we have now released our next book." *True Green @ Work: 100 Ways You Can Make the Environment Your Business* focuses on being environmentally conscious at work.

"There's a lot you can do both at home and at work to make environmentally friendly changes that don't compromise on style. Whether it's saving energy by going for recycled furniture, organic cotton sheets or simple things like using beeswax candles or using

beautiful pebbles in your garden, there are lots of ways you can bring eco principles into your home that are also aesthetically pleasing," Bonnin says.

"Simple choices, such as using solar panels or recycled water for gardening, are really smart decisions and in themselves carry a sense of style, which ultimately is all about the way we define ourselves in the world."

"Grow your own vegetables," she advises. "You can even grow striking-looking tomatoes in a pot on a balcony and add wonderful fresh herbs to your salads and meals. Add a woollen throw to the end of lounges and comfy chairs so it's inviting to snuggle up underneath and read a book or watch a movie without having to turn the heater on."

"Of course, it's difficult to be 100 per cent green all the time," she says, "but even a little goes a long way to helping the environment. It's been shown that just limiting your showers to four minutes will save 15,000 litres of water a year."

"I really don't see any style factor or sense in McMansion houses that burn up more resources than we can afford," Bonnin says. "True green design is really all about making educated, informed choices that will benefit everyone. Innovative practices in sustainability and art design can function together compatibly in the home," she says.

"Ultimately, going green can be fun, fashionable, functional and good for the environment."

Green resources

- Green Pages Australia: www.greenpagesaustralia.com.au
- Sustainability Victoria: www.sustainability.vic.gov.au
- Be True Green: www.betruegreen.com
- Your Home: www.yourhome.gov.au
- Your Abode: www.yourabode.com.au
- Green Building Council Australia: www.gbcaus.org