

essential home

# Sustainable v status

There is a growing awareness of eco-friendly homes but it is not being put into practice.

**Words** Andrea Jones

COULD it be that we are our own worst enemies when it comes to creating eco-conscious homes? Andreas Sederof, director of Sunpower Design, says we're still choosing to put our money into status items such as plasma TVs and swimming pools rather than environmentally sustainable products.

"There's a massive thirst out there for people who want to make their homes energy efficient," he says. "But it's a question of values and priorities: do you value a \$20,000 granite benchtop more than an underground rainwater tank?"

Sederof, who has been designing low-energy homes and commercial buildings for 30 years, is speaking to interior design professionals at next week's Australian International Furniture Fair on environmentally sustainable design.

"We get a lot of clients who wish to do the right thing but lifestyle issues are still having their say: We are amazed when people say, 'We want to collect rainwater, we want to have a seven- to eight-star energy-efficient home, but we want a swimming pool too,'" Sederof sighs, pointing out that in Melbourne, his company's home city, water restrictions make it illegal to use town water to fill a swimming pool. "We ask them, 'How are you going to fill it?'"

Sederof says low-energy fixtures amount to only about 12 per cent of a building's total cost. "There's a perception that sustainable buildings are expensive. But when you talk cost it doesn't make sense to isolate sustainable fittings."

An average person with a fixed budget has to make choices. "An LCD screen [costs] as much as a solar hot-water heater," he says. So which is it going to be?

"The real problem is our aspirational society. We do know what we need to do but have to get our values straight. It's really a psychological-value judgement problem. There's this whole issue of educating people."



Sederof despairs of the fashion for oversized new homes and the attitude that size doesn't have an environmental impact.

"They say, just install an extra seven or eight solar panels. That's not the point."

In addition to educating the public about its responsibilities, Sederof is keen to urge designers to "choose your materials carefully. Some of these can have a massive effect on the environment.

"The issue for designers is there is no clear indication of what materials are sustainably made. There is no independent certification or sticker you can look at to find out what is truly sustainable and what is not."

The Australian Government established the Good Environmental Choice award, which is a rigorous standards test that manufacturers can apply for and then advertise on their products, though few companies have taken it up.

Next week's furniture fair is encouraging the industry to have a stronger eco-focus. As part of the concurrent Decoration + Design exhibition, six local architecture and design firms have been invited to create eco-themed room sets.

Interior designer Arthur Koutoulas is creating an installation he hopes will be a conversation starter. "We want to entice people to think what objects are damaging the environment and what are friendly. For instance, the automobile has done more damage to the environment than any other object that humans have created," he says.

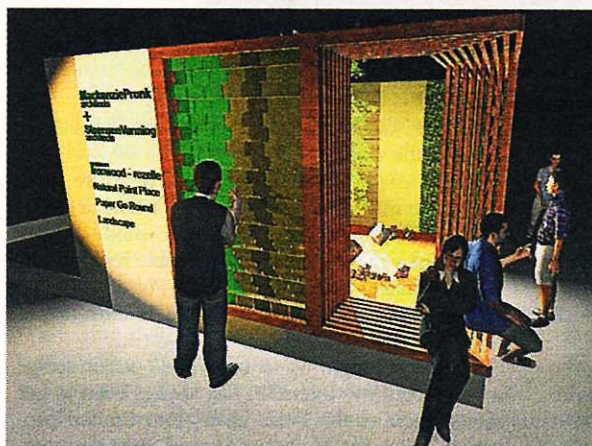
So Koutoulas has designed a car made from a material most people would be amazed to consider eco-friendly: foam. Australian foam manufacturer Joyce has a Good Environmental Choice tick for its biodegradable high-grade foam, which is used in select upholstered furniture as well as locally made cars.

Meanwhile architect Heidi Pronk of Mackenzie Pronk Architects is taking a more spiritual approach to sustainable style. In collaboration with Chris Arkins of Steensen Varming, a distinguished design firm that collaborated with Joern Utzon on building the Sydney Opera House, the concept is a window seat onto a tranquil, Zen-style, raked garden. The wood used in the window is, of course, recycled. The twist is that the pebbles in the garden are crushed concrete.

"We hope it will be quite calm," Pronk says. "It doesn't have to be kooky or wild like early sustainability projects which, for some reason, needed to show off their sustainability."

Pronk is keen to disprove the notion that sustainable style is "perhaps not as good looking or as slick. In fact you can still get sharp lines and great style." And visitors to the exhibit will be given cards (of recycled paper, of course), embedded with seeds to grow their own native bottlebrush.

Gardens are an important part of our sustainable future and one we've been getting all wrong, says landscape designer Wendy Clarke of Dirtscape Dreaming, who



Calming spaces... (from top) a drought-resistant garden with cubby house of paperbark and banksia cones amid grasses, wisteria, bottlebrush and more by Wendy Clarke; a window seat to a Zen garden by Mackenzie Pronk/Steensen Varming; natives in the garden.

is also a guest speaker at the furniture fair on the subject "nesting with nature".

Her vision of sustainability is as much about sustaining ourselves as our environment. And she's critical of the popular interpretation of low-maintenance gardens that have done away with dirt in favour of concreted, decked and paved spaces which, she says, are "quite sterile. A garden that just has a few pots is so tightly constructed that it is lifeless and artificial.

"If you get a garden that is designed well and the planting is right [taking into account the micro climate and the soil in your suburb], it's going to be low-maintenance. And there's a whole ecosystem that develops when you plant the right things," she says of the animal and insect life that finds its way there. "It's such a joy in winter to see life out there!"

Like Sederof, Clarke blames society's obsession with homes as status symbols for us losing touch with sustainable core values. "People have had this heavy expectation put on them that their house is on show and that the garden becomes part of that. So the ability to express yourself with your garden is now a no-no," she says.

Clarke's alternative view is to build gardens that lift the spirits. "When you went on holiday, think about the places that made you stop in your tracks and say, 'Wow! That's the starting point for connecting with nature.

"Your garden should transport you to that place, that 'Aha!' moment. And that's when you start to relax."

Yes, but is it achievable in our fast-paced lives? "How bad is it once a month to go out and weed? After all, what happens when you weed is you don't think about anything else," she says.

So it's meditative, too?

Clarke is reluctant to use the M-word and carefully avoids any new-age clichés when talking about what she believes is a much more prosaic business.

"I was an oncology nurse for a long time and that connection with nature often occurred when people realised they were going to die. And I thought, it shouldn't take that long.

"We get lazy and the last thing we do is nurture ourselves and look after our minds.

"There's a reason we feel good when we're out on the water or in the bush. We have to recognise that often it's not just about being on holidays but about being out in nature.

"When people get the very best out of their garden they are connected to it on an almost spiritual level.

"As a society we're ready to give back to nature and gardening is a good, sustainable way to do this."

For more information on creating an environmentally sustainable home, see the joint government-private sector site, [www.yourhome.gov.au](http://www.yourhome.gov.au).

The Australian International Furniture Fair runs from February 6 to 8 at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour. Open to trade visitors only. For details, see [www.aiff.net.au](http://www.aiff.net.au).