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YOUR HOME

Building tomorrow's heritage

By Amber De Nardi

In the aftermath of Sydney's building boom, focus has so strongly shifted to sustainable housing designs – that is, designs which are eco-friendly and energy efficient – that 2004 will be celebrated as the Year of the Built Environment. Millions of government dollars are poured into incentives and support schemes to encourage architects, builders and home owners to team up and generate environmentally suitable and sustainable housing concepts.

President of the NSW branch of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) Caroline Pidcock is a passionate advocate of energy-efficient housing to the point that her firm even offers discounts to people who incorporate effective environmental safeguards in their home design. However, Ms Pidcock points out that more people would more readily co-operate with designers and government incentives if they were better informed on energy efficient issues.

"Sustainability does not depend only on implementing good water or heating systems in a home," Ms Pidcock pointed out.

"Society needs to look at all aspects of environmental maintenance – for instance, there's no point in building a sustainable home if you need to drive hundreds of kilometres a week to get to work."



Another bugbear with sustainability is that there's no black and white answer – what's right in one locality may not be necessarily right somewhere else.

"But one thing is clear," Ms Pidcock explained.

"All homes will eventually be rated on their energy efficiency, and this will impact on their re-sale value."

A good energy-efficient, sustainable housing design is one which brings various elements together and ensures that they will work well for a long time. For instance, a design allowing a home to be cool in summer, have at least four hours of sun during winter, with recycling systems in place, gardens needing less water and featuring a water tank are some issues which define a good design.

Building giant Landcom is providing leadership by not only demanding better housing designs but also questioning how big a home needs to be.

"Bigger homes are more expensive to build because they involve more thermal mass – that is, bricks, concrete, tiles and



so on which need to be manufactured, processed and delivered," Ms Pidcock said. "They are also more expensive to maintain while an energy efficient home – one which is naturally cooler in summer and warmer in winter and has good air quality – is much more enjoyable."

Here are some suggestions:

- good design comes down to building a home which complements your lifestyle – for instance, if you wish to entertain a lot at home, much of your domestic activity will centre around your kitchen;
- look at the site to help maximise opportunities for a better designed home, such as choosing the thermal mass which will provide the most appropriate and therefore the most inexpensive insulation;
- consider staging – you don't need to blow the budget to get the house of your dreams – build as you need and choose a design which offers the prospect of adding on;
- create an inside/outside flow – in other words, a connection between the comfort of the indoors and the mild climate and beauty of the outdoors.

"We also need to be mindful of the fact that today's housing is tomorrow's heritage – so designs have got to be long lasting and practical as well as beautiful," Ms Pidcock said.

"People also need to be aware of what chemicals and other materials are used in the building of a home and consider where the materials come from – for instance, it's not very clever having an eco-friendly home built with bricks which need to be transported from across the other side of Australia.

"Good design choices involve considerable research but it's worth the effort, not only to promote better lifestyles but to safeguard our environment as well."