

SUSTAINABLE AUSTRALIA

SPECIAL REPORT

Comfort from green living

Design alone can affect up to 80 per cent of a home's thermal efficiency.

Studies show a thermally efficient home is now cheaper to build than one that soaks up money in gas and electricity bills, with green builders using recycled products that replace traditional materials like mud brick and straw bale.

Environmental consultant Danielle King, who runs a company called Green Moves that advises people how to create sustainable homes and offices, says people can build a house that's sustainable as cheaply as one that isn't.

"That's a nice turn-around from what it used to be years ago, when it was two to five per cent more expensive," she says. "Now it's the other way, and the findings are based on studies that analysed building designs and costs around Australia."

"Building a mud brick or straw bale house in the city is not

necessarily a practical idea. The hardest thing to do is to find the right builder, because there are different builders for different places. The city versus the country for instance.

"Instead of mud or straw bale for inner-suburban houses, there are products like Polystat structural panels for example that use recycled materials with very high thermal efficiency. They go up easily and can come down again to be recycled."

The State Government website at www.sustainability.vic.gov.au offers wide-ranging tips and advice on how to create a more sustainable home, including how to guides, videos, renovation profiles, fact sheets and "smarter choice" calculators.

"Our research finds that the top renovation regrets are inadequate insulation, air leakage, poor lighting, not selecting double glazed windows and poor design," the website says.

Ms King points to the Housing Industry Association's GreenSmart program, which lists accredited green builders. "The Master Builders Association also has a green living program, so



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you could look for one of their qualified builders too," she says.

"Look for someone who actually 'walks the talk'. When they say they do sustainable building, ask them for references and ask what's sustainable about what they do. Just do a Google search, and you'll find a few out there if you ask the right questions.

"We did some studies and found that the cost differentials just in terms of heating and

cooling were in the thousands of dollars. Design alone can affect up to 80 per cent of the thermal efficiency of the property, so it makes sense to make sure you have the right design for the right property."

Under the National Construction Code, all new homes, extensions and major renovations must have a six star thermal performance rating for the roof, walls, floor and windows. "You can get up to 10 stars," Ms

King says. "One with that rating shouldn't need any heating or cooling - whereas sitting in a one star house would be like being outside. The cost savings of high star ratings can be massive."

To make an existing house more sustainable, Ms King says the most important step is to improve insulation, particularly on the roof, and to install close-fitting thermally lined curtains or blinds over the windows. www.greenmoves.com.au