

COUNTING THE GREEN COST

HOUSING DEVELOPERS ARE EMBRACING SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVES. BUT AT WHAT COST?
EDWINA IKIN INVESTIGATES THE AFFORDABILITY OF SUSTAINABLE HOUSING.

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The concept of sustainability has for many years been associated with the environment and its pioneers were considered to be people with a radically different lifestyle. At worst, it has been used as a marketing buzz word. However for trail-blazing property developers in Australia, the notion of sustainability now encompasses a much broader range of considerations. And it is the essential challenge of providing affordable, sustainable housing that is inspiring further innovation.

Surveys, feedback and spectacularly strong sales rates have proven that homebuyers appreciate the benefits of sustainable developments, but also that most can't afford to pay too much extra for these benefits. In the past few years, though, several companies have led a revolution in embedding sustainable principles that are truly cost effective when passed on to purchasers. Features that add a small initial cost to a house price become huge money savers over time and can provide incalculable lifestyle benefits – at both individual and community levels.

A comprehensive approach to sustainability is fundamental, according to Pru Sanderson, chief executive officer of VicUrban. "It's not just about environment, [it's about] taking a long-term view, caring for the people in those developments now and into the future, as well as caring about the environment around those developments," says Sanderson.

VicUrban has pioneered initiatives including water sensitive urban design (WSUD) systems at Lynbrook and at Cairnlea in Melbourne, and has also established industry standards for harvesting stormwater, according to Sanderson.

"Creating sustainable communities is more than delivering project imperatives, it's about delivering communities that are integrated with their surroundings, maintain consistent standards of design, are well connected to transport, offer education and employment opportunities and are enjoyable places in which to live and work."

"Housing affordability is not only about providing value in terms of the purchase price and reduced household running costs, it's the use of good design and innovations to reduce the purchase price of house and land packages and operating costs," says Sanderson. "And offering homes that cater for more than one paradigm of living. For example, the ageing population often doesn't need more than one or two bedrooms, but it is very important for them to remain close to their extended families. They want to downsize, but not relocate and downgrade." And it is a similar situation for the ever-increasing number of one-person households.

Sanderson believes that providing a variety of accommodation is great for neighbourhoods, as buyers are able to afford exactly what they need, resulting in a demographic mix of happier, healthier, less stressed people.

VicUrban has created the Sustainable & Affordable Home Initiative



Above: Cairnlea in Melbourne's north west pioneered the use of Water Sensitive Urban Design and established the industry standard for harvesting stormwater for recycling and re-use.

Right: Pru Sanderson



together with the Department of Planning and Community Development and the Office of the State Government Architect. The Initiative aims to produce energy efficient homes that the average family can afford. Sanderson says it is the adoption of these new styles of housing products by volume builders that will ensure that modestly scaled, well-designed, efficient-to-run houses will become widely available on the market.

"But it's not just about the cost of the house at the outset, it's also how comfortable that house is to live in, its location in regards to amenities like schools and transport, and how much that house costs to run," she says.

"A poorly positioned hotbox sitting in the middle of a paddock miles out of town might not cost much to buy, but it's not an affordable solution in our eyes."

Design

Design has become a critical element in sustainable development and the success of places can be very dependent upon good design. "Before pen goes to paper, we must thoroughly think through how to embed sustainable principles in that neighbourhood from the outset. That means everything from physical planning to financing, partnerships and what kind of relationships and programs you may need to organise for the community," says Sanderson.

"It's not just the physical, it's through to tangibles such as community education programs – a multi-pronged attack is necessary. "You can only make a real impact on the environment and improve



Left: Aurora, VicUrban's flagship project in Melbourne's north, is the most sustainable development of its kind in the country providing up to 8000 6 Star Green Star homes for Victorians.

Below left: VicUrban has also established industry standards for harvesting stormwater, according to Sanderson.

lifestyles if you think about a whole community as an eco-system. So in order to have the balance of lifestyle, affordability and environment, you have to get that equilibrium right," says Sanderson.

However, the importance of applying sustainable principles to whole neighbourhoods does not diminish the key role individual housing design plays in delivering sustainable outcomes. With regards to sustainable housing stock, design is no longer considered to be just an aesthetic issue. Sanderson believes sound design principles concentrate on being "for our environment, lifestyles and the time in which we live."

Recognising the need for swift innovation in the area of sustainable design, building companies, architects and developers, including VicUrban, began the challenging and expensive journey towards fully embedding sustainability in their developments only a decade ago. The most taxing theories have now been de-mystified and, thanks to heavy financial and intellectual investment on the part of these companies, the innovations are now relatively simple to execute and therefore cost-effective.

Sanderson applauds the industry's courage and capability. "Our partners are seeing the results of making an initial investment, they now understand principles behind the implementation – they are now aspiring to build seven, eight or even nine-star [developments] moving forward."

Measuring sustainability?

VicUrban is working alongside the Victorian development industry to establish a consistent and common framework by which developers can plan sustainability in urban development.

Sanderson believes the framework will give industry a system that quantifies sustainability for a range of urban developments and across objectives of commercial success, community wellbeing, housing affordability, urban design excellence and environmental leadership.

VicUrban has been working with industry developers, local authorities and industry bodies such as the Property Council of Australia (Victoria), Green Building Council of Australia, Building Commission, Urban Development Institute of Australia (Victoria), Sustainability Victoria and Melbourne Water to further refine the framework.

The framework will seek to influence change in Victorian housing developments that work against their inhabitants and the environment. It is proposed that the industry will be custodian of the framework and its future delivery.

As people become more educated and embrace the notion of sustainable, affordable housing, they will begin to insist on it, Sanderson predicts. Demand for such housing will also increase as energy efficient, sustainable homes rapidly increase in value due to their greater comfort levels and lower running costs. In fact, in the near future, a home's re-sale value will inevitably be linked to its (and the community's) sustainable features.

The development of increasingly sustainable communities is an area of continual innovation which will no doubt see some exciting new initiatives ahead. ☺

