

House hunting

Searching for a new home? Here is what to look for to find a sustainable option

Andreas Sederof gives the lowdown on what to look for when buying a home



Another important consideration when looking at location is to find out if the area has any local council controls or restrictions such as heritage overlays. Local council restrictions may affect your ability to make changes to the home, including the installation of rainwater tanks and solar hot water. In rural areas check the cost and availability of electricity, gas, water supply, wastewater treatment and garbage disposal. In some locations it will be cheaper to be self-sufficient in power and water rather than pay the expense of connection to the mains utilities.

Renovators delight

Now that you have the location, its time to check out the house. According to Andreas Sederof from Sunpower Design, the first thing you should look at when inspecting a house is to check whether it is has good exposure to the north sun.

“Ideally you want a house that has a long east-west axis and that has a good northerly aspect that will not be overshadowed by trees or flats,” says Andreas.

“This is especially important in winter. Roof windows may overcome this problem however it’s important to get expert advice as roof glazing can be tricky.”

In all but tropical climates you want to have good solar access to passively heat and cool your home. The size, orientation and slope of the block will affect how well you can capture the sun to warm the house, provide natural light, heat water with a solar hot water system or to even power your home with solar panels.

“The second thing to check when you walk into a home is to see if the house hasn’t moved, that all the doors and windows sit squarely. A house that has shifted will be a leaky building that would require a lot of structural work to fix, draught sealing alone will not be enough. Timber floor dwellings can be most at risk as gaps can appear around the wall frames,” says Andreas.

Another important consideration is whether the house is well insulated or has the potential to be. “If you are looking at an A-pitched house that has exposed roof beams it will have an insulation R-rating of 1 to 2 when ideally you need a rating of R-8. It would take a lot of effort and money to insulate.”

“Check if the house has any insulation and if not make sure it has the space and you can access the ceiling and walls to install insulation,” says Andreas.

By looking at the home and how it sits on the block as well as its structural condition you will be able to assess the potential of the house to be energy efficient.

Waterproof

Also check the house for water saving potential. If the house does not come with rainwater tanks, check to see its potential here. Is there space for the installation of a tank close to downpipes for easy collection?

A lot of new houses have the plumbing located within the concrete slab of the building. This can be a problem when you need to access the plumbing to install a greywater system or other water saving devices.

The bottom line

With all major purchases it comes down to the bottom line. Make sure that you choose a house that fits within your budget and that you set aside money to improve its energy and water efficiency or get professional help. By choosing a house that is or has the potential to be a sustainable home you will save money on running costs and have a more comfortable home.

Looking at how thick the property pages are in the newspaper, the Australian housing market does not look like slowing down. The majority of the houses up for sale are not new housing stock but existing homes. So what should you look for when inspecting houses to find an environmentally-friendly home?

Location, location, location

The old real estate adage is a most important aspect of finding your sustainable home.

Before inspecting the house, check that its location suits your current and future lifestyle.

Is the house close to schools, work, shops and even where you like to go out and relax? Does the house have good access to public transport, walking and cycling paths? There is no point in having an energy efficient house if you rely heavily on your car. Each Australian home produces around 14 tonnes of greenhouse gases each year and a third of this comes from cars. Reducing the amount of time you use a car to get to places will not only be better for the environment but also for your health and hip pocket!

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Buying a house checklist

Will the home suit my lifestyle now or is adaptable into the future?

How big does it need to be?

Is there money in the budget for better design and efficiency and/or money to get professional advice?

Is the house located near places you visit regularly, such as work or school, shops, friends and family?

What options do I have for getting local food in or near my home and could I reduce the distance my food travels?

Is the home big enough for what I need, but not too big to increase my energy use for heating, cooling and cleaning?

Are the main living areas facing north with windows to maximise warm winter sun?

Are the eaves large enough to provide shading from the summer sun, or can they be increased in size to do so?

Are windows and doors located appropriately to get good natural cross ventilation, or can they be adjusted to do so?

Are windows located on the east or west and do they need to be shaded, or can they be relocated or removed?

Will neighbouring buildings cause overshadowing problems?

Are seals to prevent draughts incorporated?

Is there a good location for drying clothes, or can one be provided?

Is there insulation in the roof, walls and doors and/or can this be added?

Is there a rainwater storage tank and/or solar hot water system, or could these be installed?

Are existing heating and cooling systems, taps, appliances, lighting and hot water systems adequate and/or energy efficient?

Are the building materials and appliances durable and low maintenance, or could these be replaced with some that are?

Are any toxic materials used inside, or could these be replaced by non-toxic materials?

Can the plumbing be accessed for installation of water saving features such as greywater systems and rainwater tanks?

For more information:

Your Home
www.yourhome.gov.au