

Free home health checks

Many people will have heard of building sustainability assessors, who measure the thermal efficiency of new homes. But for people who want to improve an *existing* home's environmental performance there has been precious little help. Until now.

The Australian Government's Green Loans program, launched on July 1 2009, aims to help homeowners improve their existing home. As part of the program, more than 1000 people will undertake Home Sustainability Assessor training to become accredited Green Loans assessors.

A free home sustainability assessment, coupled with access to a four-year interest-free loan of up to \$10,000, will enable homeowners to make immediate energy and water-saving changes, from draft-sealing to installing solar panels and greywater systems.

To find out what was involved in a home sustainability assessment, *Sanctuary* followed two assessors as they did their rounds in southeast suburban Melbourne.



Home Health Check no. 1: Balaclava

Kids come along and change everything.

So it was for Melbourne couple Richard Foxworthy and Philippa Sawyer, when the commencement of their family saw them outgrow their Deco flat in Melbourne's St Kilda and start looking for family-scale accommodation within cooee of their preferred bayside lifestyle zone.

A 1940s double-brick duplex they found in neighbouring Balaclava was affordable and, with four bedrooms and two living rooms, was large enough for a growing family. But along with "lots

of pluses", in the 18 months they've been in residence a few minuses have shown up.

They quickly fixed the unworkable bathroom but know that soon they'll need to address the limitations of an upstairs attic bedroom – shared by their two sons, aged four and two. Even kneeling, Richard's head nearly scrapes the ceiling and the children will soon outgrow its cubby-like charms.

The downstairs kitchen/living room is also an issue. Due to its westerly orientation and shading from the back porch, for most of the year it's in semi-twilight. "So cave-like that even on a beautiful day we have the lights on," says Richard.

They need to do a renovation but, says Richard, "we haven't got a clear vision what to do. We have some objectives – lifting the roof is one."

It was timely, therefore, that in the pre-planning phase the couple were among the first in Australia to benefit from a visit by a Green Loans home sustainability assessor.



Why should I do a green reno?

Apart from reducing your carbon footprint, making your home more environmentally friendly is a timely investment. The next 10 years will see the housing market shift towards environmentally friendly homes in response to pricing shifts for water and energy, smarter building regulations and consumer demand.

Reduce your home's environmental footprint with the Green Loans program

By Jenny Brown



Fancy a \$10,000 interest-free loan?

Getting a free home sustainability assessment is the first step to qualifying for a Green Loan of up to \$10,000. To find out if you are eligible for a Green Loan and/or register for a home sustainability assessment, go to www.environment.gov.au/greenloans or phone 1800 895 076.

Richard says that although he's "interested in the philosophy and politics of sustainability, I'm no expert and haven't done a great deal of research. I understand the basic principals but this was a chance to get some real expertise in assessing the house and some real clues on what we need to do."

In a 90-minute consultation, Nina Bailey ran her informed eye over things that could introduce energy efficiencies and elevate comfort levels in Richard and Philippa's home.

As the consultation progressed through each room, Richard was asked very detailed questions about his home's performance, including heating – the 20-year-old gas heater groans "and doesn't sound that healthy" – and cooling – "the front

living room can get very cold in winter but the sun belts into the back living space in summer and it gets very hot. The old airconditioner is just not worth it."

What sort of hot water service is there? How does the fridge perform and at what temperature? Where are the drafts coming from? What expanse and type of glass did each room have? What about insulation: under floors, in walls and in the roof? And how much of that equipment belonging to Richard – a self-confessed gadget enthusiast – is on constant standby?

The household utility bills are brought out. Nina explains that "we start with the big ticket items and think about the things that use the largest amounts of energy because as much as 60 per cent of energy use can go on the heating and cooling."

Whether the couple will elect to apply for a Green Loan or not, the rigorous assessment process was, says Richard, invaluable and highly stimulating. "It gave us a real game plan for the future, because we are intent on raising the children here."

It also put the horse before the renovation cart and helped the couple prioritise changes – some of which may be relatively invisible, but which will make a tangible difference to their lives and to the planet.

Nina Bailey



Nina Bailey, a Melbourne based environmentalist, has spent her working life promoting behavioural change. In Green Loans she feels she's found the perfect platform. Working "one-on-one, household-by-household is a fabulous opportunity," she enthuses.

With a double degree, including a masters in environmental social science, Nina's career direction was set in 2006, a year in which public interest in sustainability gained impetus "with Al Gore's campaign and with the continuing drought". Looking to make a difference, she joined the Australian Conservation Foundation's GreenHome program, which concentrates on household sustainability.

More recently Nina has been working part-time on Environment Victoria's GreenTown initiative, which works with culturally diverse communities: "people who don't always get the government's mainstream environmental messaging". Nina chanced across the Green Loans program while researching sustainability rebates and "thought it was a fantastic idea".

With Green Loans she has an opportunity to reach the wider community. "What is great about Green Loans is that you can work directly with so many people. I'm hoping it will make a huge impact."

Home Health Check no. 2: Ripponlea



The sunny back garden has possibly the best lemon tree on the block. To Russell Baricevic and his partner economist Julie Toth, the free-standing, early 1900s villa sold to them in 2007 as an “economy Edwardian” had plenty of scope for a family that had just spawned a set of twins.

It put Russell back in the “fantastic, familiar and child-friendly” southeastern Melbourne neighbourhood of his childhood, which was a happy synergy because he opted to become the home parent while his partner pulled in the wages.

The house, with its two bedrooms, living rooms and 1960s sunroom addition at the rear, has enough current accommodation, but it also has “the right bones” to cope with a planned upstairs bedroom addition.

While Russell is insistent that the kitchen remain a separate room “because I don’t like the idea of living in a kitchen, I’m more formal than that,” the modifications will give them the chance to claim

Adam Maxey



In this role, he says, “I was constantly giving advice to people about where they could start with energy-efficiency initiatives”. Having given them the information, he says, the callers invariably requested Adam to make it happen “at their house”.

Recognising that an opportunity existed for a follow-up sustainability service, Adam and a mate set up a consultancy called Green Hammers (www.greenhammers.com.au) “which combines consultancy with project managing people’s sustainability plans”.

Hearing about the Green Loans, Adam realised he was looking at a natural segue, “an add-on to what I was already doing”.

“It’s a huge grass-roots action, is funded by the Federal Government and it’s starting at neighbourhood level.” He sees great potential for flow-on benefits: “One conversation might lead to a follow-through conversation between neighbours”.

And Adam is always happy to start the conversation. “I like giving lots of information!” he laughs.

A temporary relocation to the coast a decade ago galvanized the environmental concerns of a bricklayer-surfer. Adam Maxey says he got involved in ocean outfall issues “and returned to Melbourne with the decision that I wanted a degree in environmental science.”

With a degree under his belt, Adam swapped his tools for a desk advisory position with the Alternative Technology Association, where he became a policy advisor.



back the house's best and most cheerful direct natural light from the toilet and laundry. As Russell says, "architects tell me that it is so characteristic of period houses that the best light is always taken up by a wet area".

With assessor Adam Maxey conducting a forensic-level examination of every aspect of the house, Russell is seizing on the opportunity to expand his knowledge of sustainable building principals.

"It's a really great thing to be involved in,"

Russell decides, as Adam drip-feeds him a constant stream of information about practical, simple, low-cost and almost instant changes that can be made to upgrade his home's performance.

Draft-proofing, for instance, and turning down a heater thermostat by two degrees will save a lot of money. "So will putting on a warmer jumper", quips Adam.

While the assessment will underpin ideas for the major renovation, this informal conversation,



says Adam, is "a great way of planting the seeds of behavioural change".

Russell doesn't need convincing when it comes to the benefits of living more sustainably. "I'm very aware of the need to use our earth's finite resources in a more economical way and that we need to respect the planet and proceed more gently".

And, he admits, the financial pay-off is also attractive. "The idea of saving money and living more comfortably...Call me boringly practical but I'm very interested in the best way to improve the energy efficiency of a house that is currently a warren of rooms".

To get the free advice via the initial consultation is the up-front bonus of the Green Loans household sustainability assessment. To qualify for the \$10,000, four-year interest-free loan would be one better. "It will allow us to take it to the next level and will be a great help, especially if we fall short."

Meantime, "I'm listening to what the assessor is telling me. It'll help us to focus and direct us to where we should start. I've already gotten some terrific ideas."



ecoMaster

In putting together this article we were hugely assisted by Lyn Beinat and Glenn Bermingham at ecoMaster. ecoMaster (www.ecomaster.com.au) is a one-stop-shop sustainability assessment and retrofit company that has been participating in the Green Loans program since before its pilot phase. Nina Bailey was trained by ecoMaster, while Glenn assisted both Adam and Nina in their maiden assessments.

ecoMaster was founded in 2004 by Victorian couple Lyn and Maurice Beinat. It came about after they volunteered to build their children's environmentally sustainable school while simultaneously retrofitting their own, very cold home. Jobs done, they saw there was an opportunity to deploy the knowledge and technology they'd applied in those projects more widely.

ecoMaster manufacture and install a range of retrofit treatments, such as add-on double glazing and draft-sealers. Their hard work and initiative was rewarded this year when they won the HIA GreenSmart Professional of the Year.

Lyn and Maurice are passionate advocates for home sustainability. They welcome Green Loans as a timely step in the right direction but insist that it shouldn't stop there. Says Lyn, "Retrofitting is an effective way to deal with existing buildings, but it is time for *all* new buildings to be zero emission. We have the technology and the need, so what's missing?!"