

# Huff and puff and blow your brick veneer down

The future of Australian home building is a reversal of the Three Little Pigs tale. Down with brick veneer – hooray for sticks and straw. James Woodford writes.

The home as we have known it for the past three decades – a brick-veneered box with no concession to energy efficiency or the Australian climate – is dying a rapid death.

In its place, a new vision of Australian architecture is emerging that will turn suburban life inside out, encouraging families outdoors, and orienting living areas to capture winter sun and summer breezes.

Not only that, there is hope that houses might even look like they belong in our unique environment.

For the first time in a generation, building designers say they are optimistic about the future. Most importantly, they have government

support for an overhaul of the housing industry.

Revisions to the NSW version of the Building Code of Australia will put the last nail in the coffin of windows without shade later this year. Northerly eaves and east and west-facing awnings and verandas – all fundamental in Australian homes before the 1950s – are already making a dramatic comeback.

The Federal Government's greenhouse office has funded the production of a technical manual, *Your Home*, which environmental architects describe as extraordinary and revolutionary. It is a key part of a course run by the Housing Industry



Model home . . . Janet Dargue and her children outside their power-efficient home at Mona Vale, showing the way to the future. Photo: Robert Pearce

Association. So far, 400 builders nationally have been accredited as "Green Smart". Soon a group of leading environmental designers, funded by the Australian Greenhouse

Office, will head off on a national tour to give lectures on sustainable housing construction and renovation. *Your Home's* principal author, Chris Reardon, says brick-veneers built

since the '70s are "about as sustainable as a Russian nuclear reactor". "Up until 1999 I call the Dark Ages of Australian architecture," Mr Reardon says. "As a society we have devalued good design. We have become lazy – solving design problems by pushing buttons and over-using energy."

Moving brick walls inside the home would be a vast improvement for energy efficiency, he says. This would allow the use of exteriors with higher insulation and aesthetic values.

While the emphasis of *Your Home* is mostly on better use of mainstream materials, for the first time the Federal Government is throwing support and money behind building methods previously regarded as the sole preserve of hippies and the developing world.

Continued Page 28  
Downsizing the Aussie dream - Page 53

## Transaction account pays 4.25%\* p.a. interest. Better than that from any other local bank.

Get a high 4.25% p.a. rate of interest calculated daily and paid monthly.

Get fee-free HSBC ATM transactions, EFTPOS, internet banking and BPAY bill payments within Australia.

Get instant funds withdrawal via ATM, giroPOST, EFTPOS, phone banking and cheque.

It really isn't any wonder we call it the Ultimate Online Savings Account.

More than you'd expect from any other local bank, perhaps, but that's because we're the local bank that's truly global.

For more information you can visit [www.hsbc.com.au](http://www.hsbc.com.au) or please phone us on 1300 308 880.

at 10/02/03. \* Deposits up to \$2000 attract an interest rate of 0.50% per annum. Deposits in excess of \$2000 attract 4.25% per annum interest. Fees and charges apply for international, some non-internet based transactions and 6th and subsequent non-HSBC ATM transactions. Terms and conditions are available on application. Govern

# Huff, puff and blow your brick veneer down

From Page 25

Straw bale, mud brick and rammed earth are all featured in the technical manual as being part of Australia's housing future. In the past month, the Government has published a series of new papers on alternative construction methods.

"Inch for inch, or centimetre for centimetre, straw has a similar insulation value to fibreglass batts," says the new report on straw bale houses. "The insulation value of a straw bale wall greatly exceeds that of any conventional construction. Straw bales also provide the most cost-effective sound insulation available. Dollar for dollar, the overall insulation value of a straw bale wall greatly exceeds that of any conventional construction."

"The effect of sound insulation contributes to the liveability of this kind of construction and can be quite marked. Even walking into the space created by an unfinished straw bale structure, one can appreciate the quietness and hear the difference compared with conventional buildings."

Even the fire resistance of compacted straw is good because it is packed tight and sealed within cement render, meaning a straw wall is almost airtight, says the Federal Government report. "Straw bale homes survived Californian bushfires that destroyed conventional structures."

Avalon-based designer Peter Downes created his award-winning home at Mona Vale to show that suburban life does not have to consist of bricks and mortar, under a pitched roof designed to fend off snow. Nor is a beautiful home the preserve of the wealthy. "I really designed the



Mona Vale house to be an alternative to the giant Baulkham Hills special," Downes says. "I have developed a project home based on this design for the northern beaches area. I am just waiting for the right builder to come along."

As a project home, its cost would be comparable to a brick veneer, he says. "People need to get smarter and reject the big boxes," Downes says.

The mere act of installing eaves or a verandah to shade windows when the summer sun is high can save thousands of dollars in cooling costs. Designed well, however, the lower winter sun still enters living areas, saving another wad of cash on heating.

The executive director of planning and environment for the Housing Industry Assoc-

iation, Wayne Gersbach, says the era of designing homes without considering energy costs is just about over. "There's an environmental and regulatory freight train heading towards the building construction industry and they can stand in the way and get whacked, they can try and out-run it or they can get on at the next station."

The biggest names in the project homes business – Masterton, Bellevalle, Clarendon, Allam Homes and Wincrest – are just five of the companies that have recently undergone "Green Smart" training.

The Australian Greenhouse Office has distilled its guidelines on home design to a dozen crucial considerations including site impacts, orientation, construction

methods, insulation, shading, ventilation, water efficiency, solar energy and landscaping. "Beautiful houses are those that fit within the natural environment, gain all the benefits of lovely views, are shaded by existing trees and give the owners a feeling of belonging," says part of its new material.

The immediate past president of the Building Designers Association of Australia, Dick Clarke, says renovators, too, can make dramatic gains.

"Take the opportunity to improve the way it works on all criteria – thermal performance, resource use, rainwater utilisation, solar energy and aesthetics. Most importantly, the building should look like it belongs in Australia." Go to [www.yourhome.gov.au](http://www.yourhome.gov.au)

Just what the Government ordered . . . the Dargues at their Mona Vale home. Photo: Robert Pearce