

# Archetypal Altona

With its chic, modern lines, a new home in suburban Melbourne throws down a challenge to its neighbours.



**A**nyone can do it — it's not rocket science," insists Jeremy Spencer. He and his wife Chi Lu built their spacious, light-filled and energy-efficient house in the quintessentially Australian suburb of Altona in Melbourne, demonstrating that a sustainable house is well within the average homeowner's grasp. To achieve their goal, Jeremy left his former job as a teacher to retrain as a builder while Chi studied to be a building designer. Her sophisticated eye is evident in every aspect of the house, with its sleek, open-plan living space.

The couple believes that the sustainable home's time has well and truly arrived. Apart from the feel-good factor (and financial benefits) of saving energy, widespread drought has forced a rethink of water usage right across Australia.

They insist a sustainable building, from its plan to its materials, is as affordable to conceive and construct as any other new dwelling. Given their example, perhaps environmental design is »





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» becoming more mainstream, after years of mavericks on the urban fringe installing water tanks and compost heaps.

In the neat paved backyard of the Altona home, a rainwater tank provides water to flush toilets and irrigate the garden beds. Solar panels heat the home's water and its internal space, and many other features ensure energy consumption remains far below that of conventional homes.

For the stylish white and blue interior, fluorescent downlights were chosen for their low power consumption. Double-glazed windows reduce heat loss during winter and motorised awnings control how much sunlight enters the house.


The garden of native Australian plants in the front yard needs little water, and is nourished with compost and mulch.

Sustainable home devotees are quick to point out that the initial costs of many energy-saving features are soon outweighed by the 'payback'. Jeremy says the Altona house saves about \$500 per year on heating and cooling costs, and the solar heater should pay for itself in about five years. The 9,000 L rainwater tank — installed for just over \$2,000 — saves about \$275 per year. And if water prices rise, as some governments are proposing in order to reduce consumption, that saving could arrive a lot faster.

While local authorities vary in their requirements and rebates, most governments are demanding far greater energy efficiency in new homes. In Victoria, for example, homeowners are refunded part of the cost of rainwater tanks and solar panels.

And while many architects promote sustainability by renovating existing buildings, Jeremy believes it is much easier for a house to perform well when it is a new construction: "With an existing house you meet unforeseen problems, like having to pull off all the insulation and start again."

Still, a recent national open day attracted 5,000 visitors to sustainable homes where people had done just that — refitted their old weatherboard homes with many modern, ecologically sensitive features. Increasingly, it seems architects and builders are developing environmental design skills, and working with innovative materials and methods to make the green home more commonplace in the suburban landscape.

"There's a psychological barrier for many people when considering a green home," says Jeremy. "But you don't have to be a tech-head to build one." 

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