

DESIGN GETS THE GREEN LIGHT

By KATE STANTON

Australian households are responsible for 20 per cent of the country's greenhouse gas emissions. But, with Melbourne's population set to skyrocket over the next few decades, a crop of developers and architects are experimenting with ways to build much-needed higher-density housing stock that also places an emphasis on environmental sustainability.

"It's common sense. Sustainable homes are more healthy homes, and they're making a positive contribution to the environment and the city," says Luke Middleton, director of the Collingwood-based EME Design, which has created sustainable designs for houses, public buildings and multi-residential projects. "There's two ways to look at it: you're part of the problem or you're part of the solution."

Middleton says sustainable apartments don't have to be costly, as long as designers start with



Milieu plans to achieve a 7.5-star energy rating for their Breese Street building.



carefully-considered floor plans that maximise space and sunlight –before moving on to add-on technology such as solar panels or rainwater tanks.

"It's a priority of decision-making that makes sustainability work," Middleton says. "You can take decisions early on in a design to make a building inherently sustainable rather than just adding gadgets to it."

Passive design principles that make buildings more airtight and energy-efficient help buyers and their owners corporations save on energy costs in the future, he says.

Open-air common spaces, such as foyers and hallways, can allow for cool air to flow through a building and reduce the need for air-conditioning. Shared walls between apartments can also make it easier to control temperatures.



"Apartments can actually work environmentally better than a home because they don't have so much heat loss and heat gain," he says.

Chief executive of Small Giants Developments Dave Martin says many homebuyers see proximity to others as a benefit of apartment living and a boon for sustainability.

"We look at it not just as an apartment block but a community of like-minded people," he says.

The company made waves in 2013 with the success of The Commons, a Brunswick apartment building that emphasized communal living – rooftop gardens, shared laundry and car-share – alongside more

traditional initiatives such as solar panels. Martin says the company's next project, The Commons Hobart, could also include permaculture classes, a closed-loop waste recycling program and maybe a chicken coop.

Milieu's forthcoming Breese Street project, which neighbours The Commons and another eco-building, Nightingale, aspires to achieve a 7.5 star energy rating through passive design and commitment to 100 per cent green power.

Co-director of Milieu Shannon Peach says the company conducted surveys with potential buyers to

learn about what they wanted in a sustainable building.

They found that buyers in their market were less interested in fitness facilities or spas, for example, than they were in rooftop garden space and sustainable finishes.

"We wanted to make sure that we were getting good value for our buyers by really chasing the design aspects that were important to them," Peach says.

Peach says Milieu has taken a more "a la carte" approach to communal facilities. Buyers can choose to forgo a laundry for extra storage and use of communal laundry facilities on the rooftop. They can also choose an apartment without a car space for a discount on their purchase price.

Breese Street will also have native landscaping, vegetable garden plots and even beehives to give the development a sense of a connection with nature.

Martin says developers and designers learn more about sustainability with each building.

"There's been a huge shift in focus and demand for these type of products," he says. "I'd like to hope that in the future this has set the bar and is the new norm." 