

2015 Australia: a sustainable home for us all?

A report from a national forum on the Built Environment claims that new building designs could help our cities survive Climate Change.

November 22, 2004 – Sydney: The need to design ‘eco-friendly’ features into Australia’s fast changing housing stock over the next decade has been underlined in a new report on the ecological challenges facing the Built Environment (**GAP Forum on Ecological Sustainability 2004 Report**). Australia is the most urbanised nation on earth and the need to conserve scarce water resources, reduce ever more expensive energy bills and protect against freak winds, damaging storms and disastrous floods could increasingly dominate the future of our sprawling conurbations.

Australian urban infrastructure, designed in the stable climate of past decades, could struggle to meet the unpredictable challenges of global warming. Electricity supply is already under stress in peak periods in many cities – higher temperatures will increase the pressure. Water supplies are vulnerable to any increase in drought. Cyclone intensity is projected to rise. Insurance companies have been hit by a succession of natural disasters at home and abroad. According to the Insurance Australia Group, a 25% spike in peak wind gusts currently increases structural damage by a staggering 650% and, if more robust methods are not rapidly adopted, householders and insurers face a flood of repair bills.

The GAP Forum highlighted a new field of business opportunities for construction firms that adopt more ecologically sustainable methods ahead of their competitors and market them effectively to consumers, utilities and insurers. As water and energy costs soar, homes which offer built-in conservation techniques could sell at a premium, while discounts for storm protected housing may well be offered by insurers keen to minimise future liabilities.

The Australian building industry, which employs over 700,000 people, is largely comprised of SMEs. The need to revolutionise housing design to meet the ecological imperatives of the future was emphasised by the GAP Forum keynote speaker Bjorn Stigson, President of the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. He advocated a more ‘hands on’ approach to getting the message across and sharing best practise. **“If we want to influence the behaviour of small and medium enterprises, we must knock on the business’ door”**, said Mr Stigson. “Once one company has been helped to save money, the word spreads like wildfire”.

The costs of reducing carbon emissions and adapting to climate change are routinely highlighted, but the grave consequences of inaction are too often ignored. The GAP Forum high-level participants from business and Government stressed the need for more research, publicity and action to tackle a developing threat to us all. Speakers emphasised that environmental design is not a luxurious optional extra, but an integral part of any sensible risk management of Australia’s planning needs.

Although the urge for ‘sustainability’ is increasingly accepted, debate still rages regarding the form it should take, or even the very definition of the word. What is certain is that commercial opportunities await forward thinking companies able to deliver innovative, practical, affordable solutions to the marketplace. Debates at the GAP Forum examining the future of renewable energy, water recycling and resource management highlighted the business opportunities which lie ahead.

Few householders today factor environmental considerations into home buying and building decisions, leading to a lack of consumer demand for eco-friendly design. Although this is set to change, with financial incentives and ecological impact information increasingly available, the report encourages the industry itself to take the lead. A new cross-sectional advisory board, the **Australian National Committee on Business Building Sustainable Cities**, created after the GAP Forum and endorsed by Federal Environment Minister Kemp and NSW Premier Carr, champions local business partnerships in promoting sustainability.

“We don’t try to solve global problems, such as ratifying Kyoto, - says Mr Roger Beale, Chairman of the Committee, – “But our unique level of access to the authorities facilitates commercially viable solutions to environmental problems. We introduce new opportunities to firms, help them unblock regulatory obstacles and call for the very best information to be made available to all Australian communities regarding the effects of climate change.”

*Full text of the GAP Forum report can be reviewed at www.globalaccesspartners.org/eco_report.pdf
Media contact: Olga Bodrova - (02) 8303 2416; olga@globalaccesspartners.org*