

Sanctuary

MODERN GREEN HOMES

ISSUE
54

RENOVATION &
RETROFIT SPECIAL

Retrofitting for energy efficiency; a strawbale Passive House;
design for bushfire & climate resilience; keeping backyard chickens

Old house
» green house

Creative
renovations
and inspired
additions

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DESIGNERS IN PROFILE

What are the biggest challenges and attractions of being a sustainable architect or designer in Australia right now?



AGNES NIENHAUS

Graduate of architecture and building designer, Beachouse
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Works in Tasmania, Victoria, SA and NSW

What kind of house did you grow up in?

I grew up with all the benefits of a passive solar designed home, inspired by Danish architecture and built by my parents: timber framed, well insulated, double-glazed windows, hydronic heating and plenty of natural light with access to beautiful forests in south-west Germany. My childhood home imprinted deeply an appreciation of good design, quality and the hands-on approach, which influenced my choice of profession and current working life.

What was the first design project you were really proud of?

The one building that makes me feel happy and healthy every day is the one I designed and built with my partner Michael in Carlton, Tasmania – a passive solar designed timber home that encompasses all of our design principles in a very simple and playful way which reflects our way of life.

What is your favourite sustainable building, and why?

If there is one building that embodies all the qualities of simple, healthy, low tech living with a natural connection to place, one that minimises its impact on our planet and enriches and inspires its inhabitants, it is Richard Lepastrier's Lovett Bay House.

What's on your drawing board right now?

A number of really interesting and engaging projects: a little timber cabin in a bush setting, a house and studio for a quirky and creative family, a modular design for a new house on Flinders Island as well as several beach house renovations in our area.

What has been your toughest design challenge to date?

Several projects on small islands and in remote locations, where the delivery and the associated logistics informed all aspects of our design process from our first pencil sketches through construction detailing to the finished project.

How can we accelerate the move towards sustainability to address the urgent climate change issues we face?

As design professionals we need to constantly improve our knowledge and understanding of sustainable design, construction and lifestyle choices. I have recently begun the process of becoming an accredited NatHERS assessor which I believe will reinforce my existing understanding of energy-efficient design and construction and ensure my future projects achieve the highest possible standards. We all need to continually adapt and learn.



SARAH LEBNER

Principal architect
Light House Architecture & Science
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Works in ACT and regional NSW

What kind of house did you grow up in?

A straightforward 1980s brick veneer farmhouse with incredible views of the Upper Murray mountains. With practical farming parents I grew up with a keen understanding for operating a house well: ventilating on cool summer nights, zoning parts of the home to keep warm in winter, and eating many meals outside, seeking a sunny winter pocket or a cool shady summer reprieve.

What was the first design project you were really proud of?

A compact but heart-warming home we refer to as 'Stray-Leaf'. It was for retired downsizers and as well as being the first residential project I largely led, it was the first to go through our modular design process. We still love showing it off as it feels like a tardis of calm, with surprisingly lovely connections to views and sunlight despite being squished between two double-storey new homes.

What is your favourite sustainable building, and why?

Architect Richard Lepastrier's own home at Lovett Bay. It is like a tent crossed with a romantic cabin. It is operable beyond what most of us would consider possible, including walls that lift right up to transform the home to a platform amongst the bushland. Visiting it was a poignant reminder that convenience or laziness in a home often inhibits us from sensory delight and rich connection to nature.

What has been your toughest design challenge to date?

Tricky design challenges usually end up being quite delightful projects because constraints often lead to more creative outcomes. For me, the 'tough' part of my job is when such a challenge is paired with clients who I just can't quite connect with. As architects we spend a lot of time trying to really understand the priorities and vision of our clients and if there's little overlap between those things and your own character it can make for a gruelling design process.

What do you wish people embarking on a renovation or build would consider?

Unlike your public and work life, at home you have control over how you choose to live. Before writing a brief that is simply a shopping list of rooms, really consider the big picture. How do you want your home to influence your relationships, hobbies, sensory experience, connection to nature, connection to community and culture, and what is the lifetime budget? In other words, before you spend such a massive portion of your life's earnings, ask yourself what your priorities are for your life and how you want to live it.