



GREEN ARCHITECTURE

Building Tomorrow

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What do you think of when you hear the term 'green architecture'? Do you think of the most modern materials and technologies, constantly updated and superseded? We met with local architect Nathalie Curtet who challenged our notions of what it means to design with the environment in mind.

Nathalie completed her education in her native France in 1988. She describes the French architectural landscape as having been constructed in light of what has been, the landscape and the history inherent in every project a builder or architect touches. French dwellings were organized around a city square and materials were sourced from what was available locally. The topology of cities, spaces and villages was an inescapable part of her study curriculum.

Nathalie's own Provençal village was raised for defence purposes. The maximum beam length of the local houses was 3.6 metres — the length of the longest, finest local trees. Rocks used for building were found on site. Every single aspect of the environment was a building consideration and Nathalie expresses concern over the contemporary abundance and variety of materials: "Anything is possible. We need to moderate that."

When Nathalie arrived in Australia, green design wasn't on the public radar and green practitioners used to be called treehuggers. For many years, she worked for firms where her philosophies made her feel isolated from her mainstream peers. Around the time the GFC hit, however, with mindful design gaining recognition and popularity, Nathalie rebranded her business.

"I sensed it was coming and it was very exciting. Green design quickly went from alternative to mainstream," she said. It was at this point in our coffee-meet that Nathalie's excitement gained some momentum. When we asked for her personal definition of sustainable development, she said that she shared the UN's definition, and then confessed that reading the words gave her goosebumps!

The UN definition has surprisingly remained unchanged since 1987: Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Nathalie designed the residences at Harmony Village in Mt Ragong. Harmony Village is an artist community and a charity providing much needed respite for the depressed and lonely. Providing instruction in painting, sculpture and drama, Harmony uses Rudolf Steiner's principles to bring 'social art' to those who need it most. To be added to Harmony Village's mailing list, email info@harmonyfoundation.com.au



An example of sustainable development in action in the Southern Highlands is the Rockleigh Road land release in Exeter. Houses planned on the lots follow design guidelines that form part of a vision for a special precinct in the Southern Highlands. They encourage architecturally-innovative, site-responsive buildings based on sound environmental principles.

The houses will be designed to respond positively to the natural conditions in the area – the changing sun paths with the seasons, the views of the landscape toward Exeter and Morton National Park and Exeter's cool climate and short warm summers.

The vision is that the proposed building designs will incorporate environmentally sustainable design principles as a fundamental component. The reinterpretation of traditional rural housing forms, which were transplanted from very different climates and cultural perspectives, is an exciting opportunity in the Southern Highlands. Elements such as verandahs and pitched roofs can contribute to climate control and be incorporated in sustainably designed homes. In order to keep the building form modest, the built spaces will relate to the exterior landscape, emphasising the horizontal character of the buildings.

Further reading:
rockleighroad.com.au

But what about the practicalities of sustainable design. Is it cost effective? Can we retro fit? Are there alternatives to rebuilding? Nathalie suggests pooling resources. For example, you can extend your house instead of rebuilding, making room for even the most blended family. Retro-fitting solar panels is also a good move, despite the slightly painful initial investment. Nathalie believes that skyrocketing energy costs will soon mean that the benefits will quickly weigh in. Today, solar power repays the initial investment in around seven years. Only five years ago, the technology took around 20 years to repay. Each day new green technologies are born, for example, Low E glazing, a much cheaper alternative to its predecessor, double glazing. If you're building from scratch, obviously the now familiar-sounding solar passive technologies are the way to go.

At this point in our chat, feeling slightly overloaded and overwhelmed, we asked Nathalie if she consults. Indeed she does, and she explained that you can draw on the knowledge of a green architect not only to build your new home, but to assess whether to buy an existing property, to provide information and recommendations and to advise on strategies to update the property in the longer term.

As for the future of sustainable design, things are looking promising, but are we moving quickly enough, or taking our holistic approach to building and design broadly enough? To build 'green' one needs green tradespeople. Nathalie expresses optimism that soon trades won't need to be so green as manufacturers are falling over themselves to supply green products to a growing, more environmentally educated market. Unfortunately though, she despairs that the legislation isn't following suit. Nathalie is concerned that the current government is pulling green incentive programs to pay for the flood damage — the ultimate irony. She eloquently and directly states that the earth is trying to "shock us" into action.

Nathalie thinks the answers to our contemporary design dilemmas might be in the wisdom of the traditional owners of the land. After all, 50,000 years is a long time to be gathering local knowledge. "Uncle" Max Duhumunran Harrison, who was introduced to Nathalie at a recent master class, is an Aboriginal elder from the South Coast and an adviser to Glenn Murcutt. He pointed out that the "white fella" didn't ask for advice when planning the Sydney water catchment area. Countless generations ago, the traditional land owners gave this area a name which loosely translates to "the place where it never rains".

So it seems Nathalie's education has come full circle. From her home in Provence where ancient stones are convenient, local and sustainable, to drawing on a 50,000 year old word-of-mouth environmental information archive, it seems that Nathalie has found her home in Australia and in mindful design. ●

Further research:
designinggreen.com.au / 0412 434 341
oobestire.org
gbc.org.au