

Confusion reigns

Making our homes greener is supposedly key to putting a brake on climate change and solving the impending energy crisis. **Emma Portier Davis** does a reality check on costs and quick fixes


We've had climate change forced down our throats only to watch leaders fluff negotiations for an international treaty to save the planet; we're reminded every winter when Russia turns off the gas that we must cut our dependency on imported energy; and we listen every day to labels like 'sustainable', 'green' and 'eco' trotted out in every context imaginable. It's with a degree of jadedness, then, that I listen to the message from Commission regulators that you can't blame greenhouse gases on industrial chimney stacks alone, and that our homes are big pollution sources too. In other words, that the evil doers are none other than you and me. Europe's buildings are apparently responsible for some 40 percent of its energy consumption (of which about 70 percent is used for heating and air conditioning) and 36 percent of emissions of carbon dioxide, a potent greenhouse gas. The construction sector accounts for close to 50 percent of our use of natural resources (water being a large component) and about 40 percent of our waste. The European Union has recently reached a deal on legislation to improve the energy performance of buildings, imposing minimum requirements for new and existing buildings, requiring certification of energy efficiency and regular inspection of heating and air conditioning systems. This will supposedly set a standard that ensures all new buildings will come close to consuming zero energy by 2020.

A 'close to zero energy' or 'passive' home would have double glazing and thick insulation, plus good ventilation to keep damp at bay. Air could enter the house via the ground, making it warmer in winter and cooler in the summer than the outside air temperature (and reducing the need for energy-guzzling heating and air conditioning). Homes may also be fitted with solar panels or wind turbines and who knows what else by 2020.

Money, money, money

But none of this is cost-free. Estimates vary but a good rule of thumb is that to buy or renovate a house to make it low-energy, at today's prices, could bump up your project costs by as much as 10 percent over the cost of a 'business-as-usual' renovation. That's hardly an

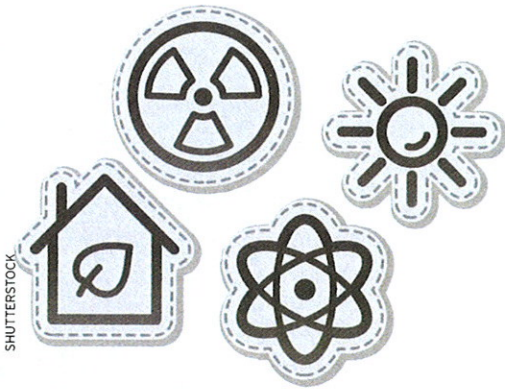


 **Not for free:** the purchase or renovation cost of a low-energy home can be up to 10 percent higher than that of a normal house in today's market

appealing prospect for home-buyers who are already making what may be their largest ever investment. Environmentalists in Belgium cheerily say such costs could be recouped within seven years by low energy bills (it would take much longer in countries with less generous subsidies), but seven years is still a long time to struggle with a hefty mortgage even if today's rates are at record lows. According to Adrian Joyce, a director at the Architects' Council of Europe, the financial incentives are not really in place to match the technology available.

supreme

"For any new-build, there's no excuse. Every house should be close to zero energy. At the moment, the reality is that these are the exception," said Joyce. "People are much more likely to do the kitchen or buy a plasma TV than fit extra insulation. With energy efficiency measures that are generally not visible, it's hard for people to see the value."



Nonetheless, if you want to build green there can be few better places to do it than in Belgium. "There's a huge incentive to move towards energy-efficient buildings," said Joyce, who considers programmes in Brussels to be very advanced compared to many parts of Europe. Brussels Environment (www.ibgebim.be) runs a competition each year for 'exemplary energy and

The good, the bad and the ugly

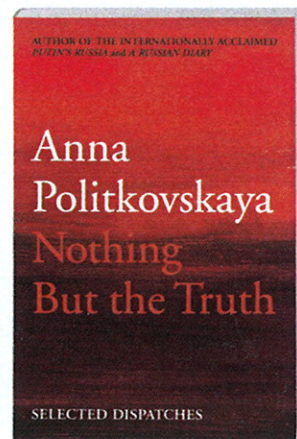
Amid all the green buzzwords, there's a danger of being conned. Architect William Froidmont from Brussels firm ArchitectsLab, said: "For a new building, you need to look first at its orientation, and then you need to minimise the energy it will need; it should have the windows on the right [south-facing] side. The third step is to look at new technologies, but this only makes sense if you do the first two well. It's no good just putting flashy panels on the roof." For Joyce "it's a very confused marketplace at the moment", because the 'sustainability' label has been used by developers to fool people into thinking that a property is green. "A place with a compost facility and a bike rack is not necessarily sustainable," said Joyce. Then there's the fear that a green house will look something like a log cabin or an igloo. Thankfully, architects are rebelling against traditional 'green' homes. Says Julien De Smedt, founder of JDS Architects: "I am almost repulsed by anything that looks 'eco'. That should never mean we have to live in a bunker." He said his challenge as an architect in a city where the architecture is "far from improving" is to

come up with good designs and improve energy consumption. This, too, is part of reducing consumption in the long run. "Something beautiful

is sustainable. If it's beautiful then it is desired and if it's desired then it's going to last." Cutting energy consumption in the home is easy enough. As European Commission spokesman on energy Ferran Tarradellas says: "You just need to do the sums. Putting thermostats on the radiator and changing the boiler is certainly cheaper than changing the kitchen." Remember though that the Commission's aim is 'close to zero energy' housing by 2020. We'll need a lot more help to take on such an expense.●

▶▶ "A place with a compost facility and bike rack is not necessarily sustainable"

eco-construction buildings'. To date, there have been 117 projects, representing about 265,000 square metres of house or office space. The latest round, launched in 2009, has seen 41 projects underway, which should be completed by October 2013. If you can obtain subsidies and suck up the remaining cost with the prospect of low energy bills to help you on your way, the next question to tackle is how you ultimately want this haven of green, and supposedly cheap, living to look.



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