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While 'sea change' marked the drift of disillusioned city-dwellers to small seaside communities, the latest trend is moving completely the other way. Renowned demographer Bernard Salt first coined the term 'tree-change', an expression that has become familiar to most of us over the last few years. Tree-changers can bring welcome economic relief to communities devastated by drought, and contrary to popular belief, they are not just retirees and baby boomers! Young professionals are also heading for the hills mid-career, lured by a utopian vision of clean air, sustainable living, and being able to let their kids climb trees and walk home from school. Their designer bush homes illuminate the path to sustainable luxury, leading by example with environmentally friendly architecture.

Australian market research discovered over two million Aussies were currently interested in sea- or tree-change. Yet another recent survey indicated that over 68 per cent of our population would like to escape the rat race. What is triggering this change? According to Bernard Salt, "Generally one or more events get people thinking about making a major change to their lives. It can be kids leaving home, the death of a friend or relative, living in a big empty house, or a realisation that one's life is passing quickly.

"Any of these can start people thinking about changing their lives and spending more time doing the things that they want to do," said Bernard.

Tree-change can frequently be presented as a mutually exclusive permanent alternative to metropolitan living; however Mark Thomas from Energy Architecture informed us "At this point in time, the tree-change hotspots in South Australia are the Adelaide Hills and Fleurieu Peninsula – both are easily commutable locations." Energy Architecture is an architectural, design, and sustainability consultancy practice, established by its director John Maitland in 1990, with a long-standing reputation for award-winning design and deep knowledge of environmental, social and economic issues impacted by built form and energy use.

So, does sustainable design mean a compromise on luxury? Far from it. According to Mark, "Sustainable design enhances luxury. Clean air, natural sunlight, considered views—and a clean conscience to go with it!"

Mark then explained a principal issue is how to deal with the current day expectations of internal comfort; the heating and cooling issues. "Unfortunately the term 'climate control' has become synonymous with luxury; when talking in terms of sustainability it is unrealistic to expect to be able to achieve 100 per cent climate control.

"Sustainable design enhances luxury. Clean air, natural sunlight, considered views—and a clean conscience to go with it!" Mark Thomas, Energy Architecture





"We would question the real quality of 'climate control' as delivered by ducted air conditioning, for example, and whether or not it is actually desirable when compared to an internal environment offering clean fresh air that is changing often.

"When designed carefully and cleverly, internal temperature can be maintained at a comfortable level using combinations of a variety of passive systems, and in turn this then offers the occupant a much greater and more realistic connection with the outdoors, which was the very reason they moved to the hills in the first place!" said Mark.

An outdoor connection from the interior should mean so much more than just large windows. Sunlight, air, space, volumes and materials can also be used to effect. This is particularly 'exploitable' in environments of intrinsic beauty.

A key element of sustainable architecture is appropriate building material selection. "A more technologically advanced approach to selection is now being employed with whole system integration as opposed to random sustainable substitution. I guess the important aspect of materials and systems choice is how it will all integrate with the whole intent of the design concept," director John Maitland explained.



Longevity of material lifecycle is also imperative. "We select building materials to maintain the lowest environmental impact levels, while ensuring long life and low maintenance. A wide palette of materials is available, including timber window frames, rammed earth, concrete block, concrete floors, timber structural framing, and lightweight metal roof sheeting. Timbers are selected from sustainable sources. We value recycled materials and will include them where possible. Our firm is always investigating new low-embodied energy products," stated John.

Finally, what does the future hold for tree-change and sustainability? John Maitland believes "This fashionable trend is paralleled by public education having a parabolic effect—and ecological architecture is already at the intersecting point: stunning design that is, of course, sustainable!" Australians are wholeheartedly embracing ecologically sustainable living—is there any other alternative?

Images courtesy of Energy Architecture

