

## Greenwashing

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**KIRSTEN ROBB JUL 23, 2016**

Buyers are being warned to be on red alert for fake-green homes as sustainability gains more traction in real estate.

Developers are increasingly marketing “green design”, but experts say consumers need to look under the hood for “greenwashing”, as some developers exaggerate the environmental benefits of new housing stock.

Off the back of sell-out success of major projects The Commons, Nightingale and Mullum Creek, Melburnians are increasingly looking to invest in eco housing.



But environmentalists say projects softly marketed as “sustainable” are often not always as green as they seem and fail to reach government standards on energy efficiency.

A CSIRO study conducted on 129 new homes last year showed almost half leaked more than they should for their mandated-six star energy rating.

Although projects may achieve high ratings in design stages, a lack of follow-through during construction meant many fell short. The Alternative Technology Association is calling for random audits, compliance programs and penalties for those who fail to fulfil efficiency requirements.



Demand for the first Nightingale project was so strong that a ballot was started for buyers. Photo: Supplied  
Dave Martin from Small Giants, the developer behind popular “deep green” apartment block The Commons, said generally, green-seeking consumers were educated and asked the right questions to make sure a developer’s ethos was solid.

“Anyone can say, ‘yeah, I’m green’, to get a sale, but [consumers] can ask, ‘do you live that way?’” Mr Martin said.

Which may be why genuinely green developments are in hot demand. Steve Mathews and his siblings Sue and Danny Mathews, developers behind Donvale’s Mullum Creek, met with success when they launched their 20-hectare development in 2014. All bar a small handful of the 56 lots have sold out.



The Cape display home costs as little as \$500 a year to run. Photo: Joe Armao

The family grew up on the land and wanted to create a truly sustainable project, requiring purchasers to adhere to environmental and sustainability guidelines that far exceed local and state government requirements.

“We invest a huge amount of time, effort and money in providing oversight and education for purchasers,” Mr Mathews said, believing the education component was a major hallmark of truly sustainable developments.

“[Greenwashing] does happen a lot in real estate marketing ... marketers promote any benefit. That’s their job,” he said. “The unfortunate thing for purchasers is that they believe they are buying energy efficient homes ... but they’re not getting what they think they’re paying for.”



Steve Mathews and his family have developed a sell-out sustainable project in Donvale Photo: Eddie Jim  
The family is now releasing the project’s research through their website in the hope that consumers, developers and builders will be inspired. Mr Mathews says there’s no reason larger developers can’t incorporate their practices.

Brendan Condon, developer of one of Victoria’s [most sustainable communities](#), The Cape, said energy costs had doubled in the past decade and energy efficient products had become cheaper, meaning sustainable homes now out-perform conventional homes in comfort levels and running costs.

Mr Condon said there were three key benchmarks that housing projects needed to hit to be called sustainable.



The Cape director Brendan Condon (left) and builder Tony O'Connell in front of the display home in Cape Patterson. Photo: Joe Armao

These were good building performance and design that gives a build at least a 7.5 star energy efficiency rating, energy efficient electric appliances and fittings such as heat pump hot water systems and LED lighting; and solar power, he said.

The Green Building Council of Australia's head of market engagement, Trudy-Ann King, said "greenwashing" was essentially the reason the council created its Green Star rating system, which only gives ratings at the end of construction. Ms King said consumers should challenge sale staff who make claims of sustainability and ask where they can get more information.

There is also scope for consumers who feel ripped off by claims to pursue compensation through Australian Consumer Law if they bought properties on that basis, Consumer Action Law Centre chief executive officer Gerard Brody said.