

# Put away your prejudices - ecohomes are not ugly

These houses don't all look like space stations - they're as varied as the local areas they serve, says David Orr

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David Orr  
The Guardian, Tuesday 5 August 2008

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Germaine Greer has fallen for a simplistic stereotype if she really believes that an ecohome needs to be built like a space station, topped with an array of solar panels ([New houses are universally horrible, and ecohouses are the most horrible of the lot](#), July 28).

Ecohomes are as varied in design as any other buildings, and should not be bound by misguided perceptions. Yes, they can be like the shimmering, timber-clad duplexes you've seen in magazines, but they can also look like the house next door.

Greer says: "The builders of ecohouses accept as a given the basic shape and dropical proportions of the two-storey suburban villa, with pitched roofs, end gables, front porch, picture windows, chimneys and so forth." This is bunkum. The main builders of ecohomes have, for years, been housing associations. And the only "given" that we work to is that ecohomes can be as varied as the communities they are based within.

While many are integrated into local neighbourhoods, others are beacons of architectural innovation. A guide to green building we issued last year contains 37 case studies - each of them unique in design. The fact that Greer and many others seem not yet to realise this is perhaps testament to their design prejudices. So when Greer says, "There is usually nothing about the ecohouse to signal that it is a new kind of energy-efficient machine for living in," I would ask: why on earth should there be?

Greer then goes on to say, contradictorily, that "the slate in the roof may be recycled, but with so many solar panels, skylights, sun tunnels and windows in it and on it, there's no good reason for it being made of slate at all".

Of course, these features are an important element in the ongoing and vital drive to make our housing greener, but they are only part of the picture. If Greer went to Drum Housing Association's recent development in Whitehill, Hampshire, she would see that, while the roofs are of a conventional appearance, they are in fact filled with fluid heated from the surrounding air, providing each home's entire central heating and hot water needs - ensuring a massive reduction in heating costs.

These houses look good and save money. What's more, I'm confident that passers-by do not stare at them in amazement, thinking they have just arrived from another planet.

Greer ends by raising the issue of the "hidden extra cost" of ecohomes. "If less energy was spent on faking sameness," she muses, "the costs could be kept down." This is a bizarre statement, with no evidence to back it up.

There is indeed a concern about the costs of building ecohomes; however, all the evidence points to the fact that the market for green technology is not well developed because only housing associations are stepping up to the plate.

The only way to deal with this is for ministers to compel private developers to build to the same high green and design standards as we housing associations do - and of course with just as much variation.

- David Orr is chief executive of the National Housing Federation

[davido@housing.org.uk](mailto:davido@housing.org.uk)

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