

This is one of the few homes that are not open-plan. "We don't like the open-plan-style homes because you can't hide the kids away," he explains, reflecting an attitude that is already seeing a trend back towards separate rooms in the United States. "They look good, but once they're built you hear everything. There is no privacy."

But open-plan is just what Lisa Horne, 31, wants. Standing in the kitchen of the Santorini, while her four-year-old son, Ryan, roams around upstairs, she is full of enthusiasm for its large combined living space.

"It's not closed in," she says. "Some houses have a lot of wasted space, but I like the Santorini." If she does purchase it, however, she'll be getting the garage enlarged. "Otherwise you are really squashed in," she says.

Horne plans to sell her home in Engadine, and build a new home on land she has bought with her partner in Wollongong. Even in The Gong, opportunities for first-home builders are limited, she says. Her block cost \$450,000, and she estimates that to put the Santorini on it would cost another \$250,000, including extras such as a driveway, floor coverings and blinds. "No way you would be doing that as a first-home buyer," she says.

**THE FUTURE**

With the first-home buyer market crumbling, and land in short supply, the project home business is going to have to change, says Peter Meredith, director of housing at the NSW Master Builders' Association.

Knockdown rebuilds will not produce the construction volumes that builders need to survive. "You will still have project-home builders, but not as many," he predicts. "And those there are, are going to want to get their hands on some land."

That means builders buying and developing land themselves or in joint ventures, and selling house and land packages, Meredith says, but New HomeWorld will not disappear. "The whole concept works well," he says.



Starting afresh... Lisa Horne, with son Ryan, plans to build a new home in Wollongong.



**WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

There are more than 100 houses to choose from at New HomeWorld, so how do you pick a good one?

**ASPECT** First, search for a home with a living area that will face north once it is oriented on your block, recommends Caroline Pidcock, president of the NSW Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. That will save on heating costs and add to the joy of living there.

"It's just a very genuinely pleasurable experience to be able to sit in the sun in your own living room," she says.

**DESIGN** Pidcock advises looking for living areas that connect well to usable outdoor areas, "so the sense of space in those living rooms is extended by borrowing that external space".

Even in open-plan houses make sure some living areas can be closed off to cut heating costs and provide privacy. Also check windows and doors. "Some of the windows aren't very openable and don't give you the sort of usage you need, and sometimes the colours of the window frames are disgusting."

Don't be tempted to save on insulation if that is optional or you could find yourself living in a "hotbox", she warns.

**LIFESTYLE** The NSW Government Architect, Chris Johnson, counsels buyers to consider "lifestyle over image".

"Make sure the building works well in terms of how you want to live rather than just looking impressive," he says. For instance, you could end up paying for a grand entry hall that becomes a huge waste of space.

**ENERGY EFFICIENCY** Johnson warns that homes that require a lot of energy to heat or cool, or spa baths that need lots of water, will become very expensive to run in future as energy and water costs rise.

**BUILDERS** Simon Tennent, chief economist at the Housing Industry Association, recommends that buyers go with bigger builders because of the economies of scale they generate.

"The bigger guys have houses that are extremely well appointed for the price," he says. They will also have customer service teams in place to deal with any complaints. And do not be afraid to bargain to get the best deal on fixtures or upgrades, Tennent adds.

"It is probably a good time to be looking at project housing because our figures are showing the industry is certainly coming off the boil. As a result, I think there are probably a few more bargains to be had."

**HISTORY OF A HOUSE**

123 NEWLAND STREET, QUEENS PARK



If ever there was a house that captured the zeitgeist of this city, this is it: a sunny terrace where renovation meets rugby league. Built in the early 1920s, this partially renovated brick house was once home to Eric Watson, one-time owner of the Auckland Warriors.

"He used to stay there when he was setting up the club, when he was going back and forth between Sydney and New Zealand," says Michael Furber, who bought the property from Watson for \$860,000 in 2001. (Furber recently auctioned it for \$1.2 million, 40 per cent more than he paid.)

Furber, who is a graphic designer, says there's plenty to like about the four-bedroom home. "It's really open and light, and it's close to Centennial Park. It's also got this really eerie wine cellar underneath."

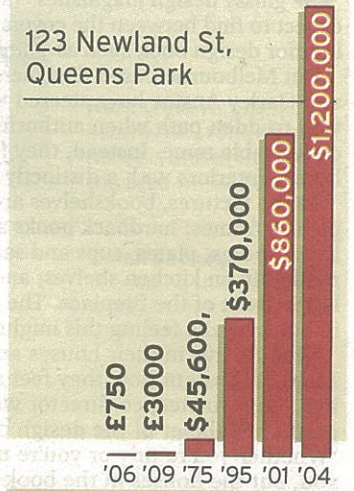
The front half of the house is original, while the back half is renovated. Furber and his wife, Celia, landscaped the back courtyard, concreted the front yard ("doesn't sound nice, but it's great if you've got kids"), and replaced the old American oregon floorboards (which were termite-ridden), with blackbutt.

"It was always going to go well at auction," says agent Scott Simpson, of Laing & Simmons Bondi Junction. "The renovations are in really good taste, with plenty of concertina doors opening it up to the yard."

"On the day of the auction there were 80 people here, and four registered bidders; people really wanted it, so it was a great result for everyone."

Tim Elliott

123 Newland St, Queens Park



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SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF LANDS

Great for kids... lawn out the back (top) and a concrete front yard (below).



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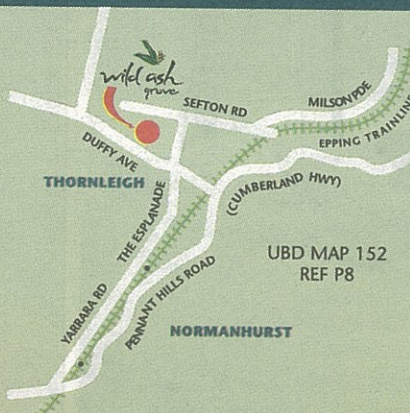
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