

Cultural Daily

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Cold Comfort of New Zealand

Pallas · Thursday, September 20th, 2012

My fingers are numb. I've been sitting at my computer for a couple of hours and the midday chill has settled into my house. There is no sun in sight to help warm things. Sun, you ask? Don't you have heat? Would you believe many houses here in New Zealand don't? Space heaters are hot commodities and the smell of wood fires is ever-present in the winter. We are lucky to have gas central heating downstairs and we do have it timed to turn up to a fairly comfortable 65 degrees in the morning and at night, but to run it any more would cost a fortune.

Energy here in New Zealand isn't cheap, though it's not [exactly exorbitant](#). It's just that houses here weren't built to hold warmth. That's why "sun-drenched" is a highly prized feature, prominent in real estate listings. Right up there with "flat sections", meaning a spot of grass you can put a picnic table on, instead of a hunkering down next to a steep hillside euphemistically called a backyard. Oh, and you'd also think double-glazed windows were a recent invention, judging by how rarely you see them.



On the one hand, you have to credit hardy New Zealanders for not complaining about seeing their breath in their bedrooms as they bravely launch from their beds on dark mornings. Their pioneer spirit, inherited toughness, and an attitude of we can "make do", rarely seen in these indulgent times, are all to be lauded. But it's no longer necessary just to make do. Substandard heating is downright unhealthy, blamed for respiratory problems among the young, old and minority populations. Uninsulated homes are also [bad for the environment](#). There's now an official recognition that cold Kiwi houses are a national problem so the government's pushing hard to get the "Warm Up New Zealand" message across.

The push is backed by government subsidies, to [retrofit](#) Kiwi homes. It's not a perfect program (still very costly), but it's a start. And as we are now well into the 21st Century, about time. I learned about how to make a start in my own home one morning as I sat reading the paper. Clutching my morning coffee to keep the blood flow in my fingers, I was reluctant to let go and turn the page when a small article caught my eye. It was about home energy assessments offered free through my local City Council. Because we purchased a 1916 "character" home, and our original windows get damp enough to grow mold on the windowsills, I made an appointment straightaway.

Out of ten possible residential ratings stars, our home scored a 2. The assessor told me not to feel too down, because most New Zealand homes are way down at the bottom on this scale. From what I saw while house hunting, ours was better than most. The eagle-eyed energy expert spotted all kinds of energy-saving opportunities he took care of on the spot. For example, he carries with him

and installs low-flow shower heads, stylish and competitively priced. And the array of draft excluders he had happened to be subsidized. After a two hour inspection, we have home improvements already completed and a 9 point action plan to follow, to fix the rest of the energy leaks. We're already working through it. Soft Californian transplants that we are, we cannot wait get the feeling back into our extremities.

That said, I did live in Northern Michigan too, in a home built in 1898 and I never felt this cold inside. There are two phrases I learned when I moved here to New Zealand that reflect a cultural attitude: "She'll be right", meaning it will work out, and "Number 8 wire", an agricultural term, referring to a kind of wire using in farm fencing that is as useful as duct tape is in the United States. A fix-all...and cheap! Clearly, this is not just a matter of implementing a government program, but making a cultural shift.

I just stepped away from the keyboard to go find my teenage son's puffy jacket (all the rage among schoolboys here). It's not solving the problem of my numb fingers, though. So I think I'll wrap this up and take the dog out for a walk to get my blood pumping. That is one healthy side effect of living in a chilly bin (cooler, in Kiwi terms). More exercise. For the pets, too...

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