

You might shell out big bucks for your house but, depending on what it's built from, these expenses may be just the beginning. Welcome to a world of ongoing maintenance.

BY LUISA VOLPATO

ARE YOU FOREVER FIXING?

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When it comes to investments, the most common financial advice you'll get is to take a long-term view. From the share market, to superannuation and property, you need to consider both the returns and the costs over the lifetime of your investment.

As the great Australian dream of owning your own home is the largest investment most of us will make, you want to be sure that it will stand the test of time without costing a fortune in ongoing maintenance and repairs.

Repainting your home, repairing cracks in the walls and dealing with damp issues are three of the most common repairs that will continue to cost you money over the years.

CRACKS BENEATH THE SURFACE

While we've heard a lot about the drought being unkind to farmers, it's also wreaking havoc with our homes. Statistics compiled by Archicentre, the building advisory service of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, for 2008 show that more than a third of houses in most states are experiencing cracking as the ground has dried out so much more than normal due to the drought.

"When the soil dries out, strain is put on the house structure and cracks can appear overnight," says David Hallett, General Manager of Archicentre. "We've heard stories of people who have been woken at night →

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AS GOOD AS NEW

When the Busseton Jetty Interpretive Centre (pictured above) in Western Australia was built in 1999, commercial builder Henry Kusal of Innovest Construction had to battle strong winds and lashing waves. The choice of building materials was key to success.

The materials had to be easy to move on a difficult construction site surrounded by water. Furthermore, they had to be hardy enough to withstand the tough weather conditions in the area.

PrimeLine® weatherboard was chosen as the external cladding. "It's a very good cladding – one of the best you can get for external use," says Kusal.

Most importantly, even though it's almost 10 years later, the building looks as good as new. Kusal says no work has been done on the building since it was constructed. "It looks like it was built yesterday," says Kusal.

by a cracking noise only to find half-an-inch-wide cracks that have opened up.

"Buildings sitting on soils that have shrunk can accommodate a certain amount of movement but not a great deal. Older brick homes, typically in the inner city areas of Australia that were first settled, are cracking up quite a lot with up to 60% or 70% of homes in some areas being affected. Newer buildings are also susceptible, however. A relatively new brick veneer house, about 20 years old in one of the worst affected areas in inner city Melbourne, had horrendous cracks an inch thick.

"Typically, cracks appear in internal or external walls diagonally from the corners of windows or doors. If the cracks are two to three millimetres in width it is no cause for great concern, but if they are five or, heaven forbid, 10 millimetres in width then it is a sign that serious reconstruction work needs to be done," says Hallett.

Regional areas with extremely reactive clay-based soils are most at risk of cracking, says Anthony Milostic, National Technical Manager for James Hardie.

"Commonly accepted wisdom is that you don't build in double brick in those areas. You really need to

use products that can cope with some flexing, like our [fibre cement] weatherboards for example."

To avoid the long-term problems associated with cracking, US architect and expert in green building practices, Peter Pfeiffer, chose James Hardie products when he built his own home. He says the flexibility of fibre cement is the key.

"When we're doing homes in areas where we've got moving soils ... we tend to want to use less masonry," says Pfeiffer. "If a house flexes, the siding [weatherboard] can handle it. If a house flexes a bit and the house is clad in masonry, stone or brick, you get cracks."

When it comes to building, many people would assume that there is nothing more solid than brick but it seems that's not necessarily what some experts believe. The only registered master builder to be recognised by the US Energy and Environmental Building Association, Jim Sargent, encourages people to build from fibre cement because he considers it stronger than brick cladding.

"That's hard for some people to understand because they think of the [three] little pigs story of the brick

house," says Sargent, referring to the children's story where a brick house offers more protection than houses built with twigs or wood.

Referring to a house clad in fibre cement, Sargent says: "This ... is a concrete house. And I've got more bracing in this house, because of the way the concrete's attached, than I would if it were a brick veneer house."

BLAME IT ON THE RAIN

It's not just the hot, dry weather that can mess with your home, keeping your investment as solid as a rock is also dependent on the effects of moisture from rain penetration. Rising damp – two dreaded words that will send any prospective home buyer packing – is a real threat to how well your house will stand the test of time.

"Wood is clearly susceptible to moisture so that becomes more challenging, whereas the cement bonded wood fibres that make up the James Hardie products are quite resistant to long exposure to moisture for significant periods of time ... that is quite an advantage that they have."

The experts agree that moisture is one of the main issues when it comes to managing the long-term maintenance costs of your home. Building with products that perform well in the wet is one of the best ways to avoid costly ongoing maintenance.

So before you build or renovate your dream home, ask yourself: are you planning for the best long-term investment, one that will keep working for you – rather than the other way around – for many years to come? ■

Dampness and timber rot is a problem for between 20% and 46% of homes in Australia.

Archicentre figures show that dampness and timber rot is a problem for between 20% and 46% of homes in Australia. What makes all the difference is how your building materials stack up to the downpours and encourage good drainage and ventilation to prevent leaks and decay.

"It's about understanding the damage moisture can do in all forms," says David Hallett.

"External timbers need to be painted or oiled to protect them from rotting as they have to withstand both cracking from dry weather and then moisture from rain. Fibre cement cladding is a cost effective exterior material that won't rot, which is an advantage over timber weatherboard," says Hallett.*

John Straube, Assistant Professor of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Waterloo in the US, has expertise in the measurement and testing of the performance of building materials. When it comes to external building products, he says the primary challenge is to deal with moisture.

"Whether it is stucco or brick or vinyl ... it's moisture from rain that is the critical aspect to deal with," said Straube.

* While Scyon and James Hardie fibre cement products are resistant to damage from rotting, to be installed correctly they do need to be painted.

Don't paint yourself into a corner

Many home owners with rendered or painted external walls resign themselves to the fact they have bought into a seven-year paint cycle. This is often when peeling starts and you have to dust off your brushes and rollers to give your house a new lick of paint.

However, if you choose building materials that require low maintenance from day one, you could save yourself a lot of money. For example, sustainable building materials like Scyon™ Linea™ weatherboard and PrimeLine® weatherboard resist shrinking, swelling and cracking to hold paint longer than timber.

In fact, Taubmans feels so confident about Scyon™ Linea and PrimeLine weatherboards that it has given two ranges of paints (Sun Proof Max® and All Weather®) a 15-year warranty on them. That's an extra three years on top of the standard warranty for Sun Proof Max, and 15 years' warranty on the All Weather paint, which doesn't offer any standard warranty.

In addition, Watty! also offers a 15-year paint warranty when you use Solagard® on Scyon™ Linea and PrimeLine weatherboard and on Scyon™ Stria™ cladding.

That essentially cuts your average repainting bill by up to half. Unlike many timber weatherboards, these products can also be painted dark or light colours without the risk of shrinking, warping or twisting, to give you an even wider choice of looks for your home.



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