

HOMEFRONT



Umnyama Ikhaya

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Ling Dobson, area manager Plettenberg Bay and Knysna, Pam Golding Properties

an increase in home buyers in her area looking for properties with sustainable power-generation features.

“There is no specific type of buyer looking for these kinds of properties,” she says. “The interest comes from people who want to live off the land and foreigners who want to invest in SA, right up to high-end professionals who either want to buy holiday homes or do a weekly commute while their wives and kids live down here.”

Her clients Mike and Fatima Blake started house hunting in 2013.

“I am English and my wife is Iranian. We were living in Geneva but came on holiday here and fell in love with it, so we decided to look for a home to buy for my early retirement,” says Mike Blake.

They made an offer on a house in Pezula Private Estate, with solar water heating and grey water reclamation, whereby used household water is treated and used for irrigation on the estate.

OUTAGES

“We had installed solar panels in our home in Switzerland because we believe it’s important to get power from sustainable rather than coal-based or nuclear sources, and when we got here, we started

experiencing load shedding, so we installed more solar panels to get fully powered up here as well,” Blake says. “Of course, there hasn’t been any load shedding since we put the system in!”

The Blakes’ power system is fully off the grid in summer, but switches to the municipal power supply occasionally in winter, when cloud cover prevents the solar panels from charging the batteries.

Dobson says that while houses are more marketable and appealing because of their sustainability features, this does not yet add a premium to the sales price. “It certainly makes properties easier to sell, but not at this stage more expensive. We’re hoping to reach a point where we can charge a premium,” she says.

RETURNS

The cost of a full solar installation is still quite high and generally only delivers a return for people who are invested in their property for the long term.

“People are being methodical about it,” says Miles Oates, CEO of Build Africa, a subsidiary of which sells home power solution Power Up. “They are weighing up the costs against the benefits.”

These benefits include independence from

the municipal grid, the ultimate cost savings and environmental responsibility.

He says: “Installing a 5kVA hybrid system, including panels and batteries, in an average house costs about R140,000.” While this does not necessarily cut all the costs of a monthly electricity bill — about R2,000-R3,000 — it does reduce the household overheads and pays for itself in about five to six years.

SALES

While a great deal of Oates’ work comes from freestanding residential installations, he says many developments are now offering sustainable energy sources as a leading sales feature.

For example, at Acorn Creek, which is billed to be the single biggest green estate in Africa, investors can buy homes that produce their own power. They come equipped with a Power Up Supply 3kVA system, comprising six panels that generate 1,500W of solar power. Buyers can upgrade to 5kVA by installing another six panels to provide 3,000W at a cost of R40,000.

“That gets capitalised to their bond, working out to roughly an extra R400 a month, but saving them about R1,500 in electricity

costs. They are immediately R1,100 better off — so this installation differentiates the development and is a key selling point,” he says.

ESTATES

Numerous other estates and houses in suburbs around the country are offering similar sustainable benefits, including Baronetcy Estate in Platteklouf, Cape Town, and Greenhill in Waterkloof, Pretoria, as well as a number of homes in Parkhurst, Johannesburg.

The planned R14bn Blue Rock Village car-free live-work-play development outside Somerset West is being built to green principles. The construction of 64 flats during the first residential phase is planned for January 2017.

Their energy- and water-saving features include solar power, double-glazed windows, insulated walls and floors, and water-saving shower-to-sprinkler systems, as well as underfloor water climate-regulating systems.

It is clear this is a growing area of the property market and while the costs of implementation do not yet translate directly into an increased price for sellers, the draws of sustainability, grid independence and cost controls are proving particularly appealing for property buyers.

MICROPOD HOUSING

Umnyama Ikhaya is a sustainable modular housing company that builds pre-fabricated micropods in a variety of finishes, designed to offer buyers an off-the-grid solution. The pods, made from repurposed shipping containers, integrate gas, wind and solar power, waterless toilets, a green growing façade, rainwater harvesting systems, inverters, batteries and solar pumps so that owners are self-sustaining.

The pods are created in Paarl, but can be railed or shipped anywhere in SA. Their alternative building method, using 95% less energy than melting down a traditional container, is a carbon-neutral housing solution officially accepted by the government as an alternative building form.

Umnyama Ikhaya founder John Venter says the pods have multiple applications, from microhomes and solar-powered garage pods to new property developments and small hospitals. Umnyama Ikhaya is building solar-powered off-the-grid classrooms and bathrooms for Camps Bay High School, Cape Town, by March 2017. The modular pods range from R359,000-R369,000.



Power Up Supply system



Acorn Creek