

## Will Anderson : The Green House

### Nuclear power? It's time the Government started getting serious about energy efficiency instead

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In the current kerfuffle triggered by the government's Energy Review, nuclear power is getting more than its fair share of airtime and column inches. This is partly because the review is perceived by many to be a clumsy vehicle for returning nuclear power to Britain's energy mix, and partly because so many commentators can't resist the schadenfreude of watching environmentalists wrestle with the competing threats of carbon emissions and nuclear waste.

Beyond all this there is a structural reason why the debate focuses on nuclear: our inability to think strategically about energy in anything other than macro terms. Energy is dominated by big kit (power stations, pylons, oil rigs, wind farms), big money and big companies. Given the importance of energy to the survival of our economy and society, it's convenient to keep the debate at this level. If there are big levers to pull, why fiddle around with all the little cogs and gears that drive our energy use?

Unfortunately it is precisely because we are so dependent on energy in all the details of our lives that a truly "low carbon" economy will only be achieved by rejigging all those little cogs. This requires the kind of long-term, low-profile ambition from which governments shy away.

In our homes, this all boils down to energy efficiency. The government is always stressing the importance of energy efficiency, yet rather than set out a radical programme of change, prefers to wield its well-worn salami-slicer. The new Building Regulations are an improvement on what went before, which were an improvement on what went before that, but each change is too small to make developers and architects really stop and rethink their approach to building. Consequently the impact of such changes is always disappointing in practice.

Last week I attended a course run by Peter Warm and John Willoughby of the Association for Environment Conscious Building (AECB) that explored the AECB's own radical building codes: "Silver" and "Gold" standards that would result in ultra-low or near-zero carbon emissions from new houses (see [www.aecb.net](http://www.aecb.net)). What struck me was the potential impact on building design from a decision to shelve the salami-slicer. Instead of trying to stuff extra bits of insulation into structures that were never designed with much care for thermal performance, the AECB's approach is to prioritise heat-loss and rethink every building detail. The result: airtight, highly insulated tea-cosy buildings where every penetration of the warm fabric is carefully designed to keep the heat in.

The AECB's building codes also address the numerous domestic energy details that current building regulations largely ignore, such as cooking, lighting and electronic goods. For micro ambition to produce macro results, every one of these details must be considered. Happily the AECB is just as interested in transforming the existing building stock as it is in new build - because retro-fitting a tea-cosy is often harder than knitting one from scratch.

So, next time you read an article grasping at the big levers of nuclear, wind or hydrogen, look about you and consider the minutiae of your own existence.

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