

Embargoed until 12.01am 14 April 2021

Love it or lose it: Australian homeowners reluctant to spend on natural disaster protection

- **Suncorp research finds homeowners prioritise bathroom renos over disaster resilience**
- **Leading experts create a prototype of one of Australia's most natural disaster resilient homes**
- **Innovative design tested by CSIRO, James Cook University and Room 11 Architects to withstand impact of bushfire, cyclone and flood**
- **Practical ways to help Australians protect their homes from future natural disasters**

As thousands of Australians continue the mop up after the East Coast floods, Suncorp research has found eight in ten homeowners show little interest in spending to make their home more resilient to natural disasters.

According to the research, almost half (49 per cent) of Australian homeowners expect to see more disasters in the next 12 months, yet the majority are opting for interior updates (62 per cent), kitchen and bathroom upgrades (54 and 53 per cent respectively) and landscaping (49 per cent) over making their homes stronger.

Suncorp Insurance Product & Portfolio CEO Lisa Harrison said it was alarming that homeowners prioritise aesthetics over the strength and protection of their homes.

"We're a country ravaged by cyclones, bushfires and floods, but the property market places greater value on luxury upgrades ahead of a strong, resilient home," she said.

"Once a disaster happens, the lives of those affected can be upended completely. The structural integrity of a home can be severely damaged by any natural disaster, leaving the home uninhabitable for months.

"Families are also forced to decide whether they should rebuild or move on from disaster-prone areas. Leaving homes and communities they've known and loved is not an easy choice for anyone and has wider economic ramifications."

"Insurance plays an essential role in not just supporting communities to get back on their feet, but also in educating them on how to minimise risk", Ms Harrison said.

To address the need for greater resilience, Suncorp partnered with CSIRO, James Cook University (JCU) and Room11 Architects to design, prototype and test what could be Australia's most resilient home.

"We wanted to explore the opportunity to design a home that was modern and functional, yet could withstand the effects of natural disasters and remain liveable – a solution that would dramatically reduce the financial, emotional and social costs associated with recovering from natural disasters".

A prototype for one of Australia's most natural disaster resilient homes

Room 11 architect Thomas Bailey explains: “The design is inspired by the iconic ‘Queenslander’, reimagining it into a safer and stronger home, that is liveable and easy to maintain. Its features help withstand natural disasters while remaining comparative to the cost of any standard architecturally designed home.”

Chief Research Engineer of the Cyclone Testing Station at James Cook University Dr David Henderson said: “Testing was a key part of the process. At our Cyclone Testing Station in Townsville and the CSIRO-operated Bushfire Burnover Facility in Southern NSW, we subjected specific features to a series of tests to understand what aspects of the house would fail or resist particular fire, cyclone and flood impacts.”

Research Leader of Bushfire Adaptation at CSIRO Justin Leonard has spent decades analysing the impact of fire on buildings: “What we’ve seen over many years is our housing is poorly suited to fire and burns down for minor reasons. Fire finds minor ways to get in and it’s the furniture that burns over many hours. It’s not about a house being unscathed; it’s about having a place to live after a fire – that’s the definition of resilience.”

Commitment to building back better

In addition to the prototype, Suncorp has introduced a new product feature within its Suncorp Insurance Home policies. An Australian first, the Build it Back Better feature commits to customers that if their home is substantially damaged, they’ll rebuild it stronger with recommended resilience options, in addition to the customers’ sum insured.

“This is one way we can help customers incorporate resilience measures within their homes to better safeguard them against the types of damage they might face in their area,” Ms Harrison said.

Advocating for change

Suncorp’s research revealed homeowners (41 per cent) think building codes aim to ensure houses can withstand the impacts of natural disasters. However, this is not the case. The National Construction Code’s primary purpose is to ensure the occupants’ health and safety – property protection (resilience) is not directly considered.

“We want to partner with governments and industry on ways this work can help to protect Australian homeowners. We hope, this work will also generate conversation about reviewing building standards as the severity and frequency of weather events increases.

“Our research also tells us that cost (31 per cent) is a barrier to investing in resilience, while government subsidies and recognising the value of resilient homes within the property market would incentivise investing in these upgrades. It will take governments, insurers and communities working together to encourage homeowners to invest in a more resilient home,” Ms Harrison said.

What can Australians learn from this project?

“We know not everyone can replicate our prototype. We hope that Australians – whether building a new house, planning a reno or thinking about ways to add value to their existing home, can take away practical ideas from our research,” Ms Harrison said.

Some incremental, low-cost ideas for existing homes include:

- Installing fixed and operable high-performance mesh screens to slow down flame spread during a bushfire.
- Installing a dual tank system of two galvanised water tanks: one for firefighting so if the home is ever disconnected from its main water source, occupants could extinguish flames on site; the second a back-up water supply, ensuring occupants always have drinkable water.

- PVC plastic gutter fixings: In the event of a fire, fixings melt, and gutters become 'sacrificial' and safely fall away from the house. This helps protect the home from embers and reduces the likelihood of embers entering the back-up water supply, affecting its quality.

For new builds, the prototype contains examples of safeguarding against extreme weather, such as:

- Installing electrical wiring in the roof to prevent loss of power during a flood event.
- Installing power points and switches at least one metre above floor level to reduce the risk of electrical issues during flooding.
- Considering a roof shape that will minimise unnecessary junctions which are prone to wear and can allow embers into the home.
- Installing glazed windows and doors – which prevents water from entering the home and evenly distributes heat load over the glass, helping to prevent cracking.

Suncorp, in collaboration with JCU, CSIRO and Room 11 Architects, created a prototype house that incorporates resilience measures to better withstand the impacts of natural disasters. In the hope that we can share the learnings from the project with all Australian homeowners, it has been called 'One House, to save many' For more information on One House and practical tips on how to improve the resilience of your home go to www.onehouse.suncorp.com.au from 14 April 2021.

- Ends -

Notes to Editor

One House Documentary

A documentary on One House will be available on Suncorp YouTube from Sunday 18 April. The documentary was directed and produced by Jonathan Kneebone and the Glue Society, and through collaboration with JCU, CSIRO, QLD SES and Room 11 Architects, showcasing how One House can withstand natural disasters.

Summary of Research Findings

- Almost half (49 per cent) of Australian homeowners think the country will see more natural disasters in the next 12 months, but 80 per cent admit to having little interest in spending on resilience improvements to protect their biggest asset – their home.
- Around two thirds of Australian homeowners believe they are responsible for ensuring their homes are adequately protected from natural disasters, but alarmingly, most say they haven't even thought about action.
- Aussie homeowners are prioritising aesthetics over resilience when it comes to making improvements to their home. Homeowners are more willing to spend on interior aesthetics (62 per cent), kitchen renos (54 per cent) and bathroom renos (53 per cent) as the top home improvement priorities. Only 14 per cent of Aussie homeowners would consider spending on resilience improvements a priority.
- Most Aussies decide to renovate based on comfort (44 per cent), increasing the home's value (44 per cent) and improving the aesthetics (40 per cent), only 3 per cent of Aussie homeowners identified natural disasters as a catalyst for renovating. Australians admit they would consider investing in resilience measures for their home if it would reduce their insurance premiums (43 per cent), if they received a government subsidy (36 per cent) or if it would improve the value of their property (36 per cent). When asked how much they would invest at any one time, most Australians (72 per cent) would spend up to \$5,000 on resilience improvements.
- Barriers for Australian homeowners to make the investment in improving their homes' resilience include cost (31 per cent), believing they're not at risk based on their own assessments of their homes and neighbourhood (24 per cent) and believing they have adequate insurance to cover any damage from natural disasters (22 per cent).

- Australian homeowners identify homeowners (including strata title) (66 per cent), local councils (64 per cent), builders (47 per cent) and state governments (46 per cent) as being responsible for ensuring homes are resilient.
- When asked who would be best to share information relating to improving a home's resilience, local councils (60 per cent), state governments (46 per cent), builders (39 per cent) and insurance companies (38 per cent) are seen as the top sources of information.

The research surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,195 Australian homeowners aged 18+ and was conducted by Kantar on 4-15 March 2021 on behalf of Suncorp.

For more information contact:

Media

Angela Wilkinson
angela.wilkinson@suncorp.com.au
0477 395 119

Melissa Cronin
melissa.cronin@suncorp.com.au
0439 224 438

Twitter: [@SuncorpGroup](https://twitter.com/SuncorpGroup)

LinkedIn: [Suncorp Group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/suncorp-group)

Facebook: [SuncorpAUNZ](https://www.facebook.com/SuncorpAUNZ)