



Stephenson's eco-friendly improvements could add 5% to the value of her flat

Francois Dubois

# Going green in Chelsea

Novelist **Julia Stephenson** explains her plans for making her London flat environmentally sound

I like to think of myself as green, but if I'm honest, I have only really been "green lite": I shop at farmers' markets to acquire a faux-rural Marie Antoinette-like glow, yet will spend 16 hours in a gas-guzzling plane to reach my "eco-holiday" destination.

It was only after (unsuccessfully) standing as a Green party candidate in last year's general election that I realised it was hypocritical of me to want to bang on about global warming in the House of Commons unless I put my own house in order.

Nor would I do it by halves: I would have wind turbines, a photovoltaic solar electric system, solar hot-water panels and a rainwater harvester. I'd convert the loft in the most eco-friendly way I could. I'd even acquire bantams for fresh eggs each day.

All fine in theory. But as I live on the top two floors of a five-storey, Victorian red-brick conversion in a conservation area just off the King's Road in Chelsea, west London, doing it all would not be easy.

What I needed was expert advice, fast. First to agree to help was Donnachadh McCarthy, author of *Saving the Planet Without Costing the Earth*; I also managed to nab architect Alex Michaelis just before he shot into the eco-stratosphere after being hired by David Cameron to green up his house. (The Tory leader's own wind-turbine plans are to be considered by the local planning committee on July 11.)

My building has a pitched roof and my loft (now a walk-in wardrobe) will be enlarged and extended (then decorated in eco-paint). The conversion will fill out the existing dips in the roof line; I will have a third bedroom, and more usable roof area.

We filed our planning application, and soon two planning

officers from Kensington and Chelsea council paid a visit. Rather than reject the plan out of hand, they were intrigued. Finally, a potential hitch became clear: the slight change to the skyline that would result, even though none of my eco-technology would be visible from ground level. I felt like pointing out that unless we all reduce our energy needs within 50 years, my street would be underwater, but bit my lip.

Weeks went by. I spent them wooing a potentially far more difficult foe: the neighbours. I own a share of the freehold with five of them and, legally, they had every right to object if they wanted, as my plans would affect our shared roof space. So I launched a shameless charm offensive, sorting out all

the window cleaning, filling communal areas with floral arrangements, decorating the bare walls of the stairwell with attractive artwork. Then I invited them to a party, plying them with organic canapés and biodynamic champagne. After 10 minutes of tough questions (which Donnachadh peddled over from his home to answer), they were so drunk they lost interest in matters ecological and began talking about their summer holidays instead.

Several nail-biting months later came approval for everything we planned, and not one neighbourly objection! I'm to be the proud owner of the first domestic wind turbines not just in central London, but in a conservation area anywhere in Britain. They barely make any noise, and are no bigger than a home satellite dish. What's not to like?

All up, my plans will cost about £60,000, including architectural fees and labour. Domestic wind turbines cost from £5,000, the solar electric system from £9,000, solar hot-water panels £4,000 and a rainwater harvester about £1,000.

Still, the government is keen to encourage people like me, so although I will spend about £17,000 on renewable energy systems, I am eligible for about £4,000 in grants, which will shave about 25% off the costs. I estimate I'll recoup the outlay within 10 years. The Energy Saving Trust ([www.est.org.uk](http://www.est.org.uk)) has details of the grants available.

My solar hot-water panels will provide me with 70% of my hot water, and my solar electric system 40% of my electricity. The turbines are a new technology, so it is hard to quantify how much energy they will produce. Donnachadh has installed one at his home in Carberwell, south-east London, and estimates that once he has ironed out a few teething problems, it will provide about 40% of his electricity.

My rainwater harvester will cut the amount of water I use from the mains, and give me grey water for flushing the loo and watering plants on my roof terrace. I plan to be self-sufficient in veggie. The worm compost is in situ, and I'm installing a water meter.

An estate-agent says my eco-improvements and resulting cheaper fuel bills will make my flat more marketable, should I ever sell; they are unsure about any capital appreciation, but as more people worry about green issues and escalating fuel costs, they estimate I could add about 5% in value. The loft conversion will increase the flat's size and value, though using reclaimed materials and hemp bricks will only give me a warm inner glow.

Meanwhile, Donnachadh is busy designing me the world's first waterless ladies' urinal. I'm employing my boyfriend, who is a builder, to do the work, which will start within weeks.

It will be essential to avoid all "domestics", and to keep everything on track. But if, while shopping at Peter Jones, you see a wind turbine dangling precariously off a nearby roof and hear loud screaming, don't worry — it will just be me letting off steam. **Donnachadh McCarthy**, 07947 884 299, [www.jacorn.co.uk](http://www.jacorn.co.uk); **Alex Michaelis**, 020 7221 1237, [www.michaelisboyd.com](http://www.michaelisboyd.com)