Green and keen: Elizabeth Wheeler and Rodney Vlais are saving a bundle by considering the environment. PICTURE: CRAIG ABRAHAM

A nine-star performer, and it's economical to boot

By **ADAM MORTON**

WHEN Elizabeth Wheeler and Rodney Vlais decided to build a 9.1-star family home in suburban Melbourne they were motivated as much by basic accounting as commitment to greener living.

"We were really confident that our choice was going to have a significant environmental impact, but it was also an area where we felt we could have quite a bit of bang for our buck," Ms Wheeler said.

Building on a former housing commission site in suburban Preston, they spent up to $40,000 — roughly 9 per cent of the cost of their $420,000 home — on measures not included in a standard new three-bedroom, double-storey home.

Most of it sounds straightforward: double glazed windows, quality insulation, tight-fitting doors and windows, a polished concrete floor, long eaves to block out the sun when at its peak and a reverse brick-veneer design that keeps the house warmer in winter and cooler in summer.

They added a 3.8-kilowatt solar system to their roof.

Ms Wheeler says their home runs on less than half the power of the average Australian house, and generates enough electricity to turn a profit. Their most recent power bill was a $784 credit.

"Compared to a house with the mandatory six-star rating, in terms of energy we save about $3500 a year," she said.

"Of course, the price of energy and water is going to increase significantly over the next few years so those savings are only going to increase. We're talking about paying back the extra cost in a decade and putting that back into the mortgage, increasing the rate at which we can pay it off."

Compared with their nine-star ambition, Ms Wheeler said the compulsory six-star rating for new homes and major renovations — which the Baillieu government is proposing to remove — could be reached through little more than good insulation and design.

But she said her experience suggested the financial benefits of better energy efficiency remained poorly understood.

"There are things we have done that not all people would do, but we need to have a more informed and adventurous building industry," she said.