

— James 7 years

DOES SIZE MATTER?

In a world of rising land prices and small lot sizes, some home owners are turning away from McMansions and choosing smarter, more sustainable solutions.

BY RACHEL SULLIVAN

— Alexandra 5 years



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Over the past two decades, the average size of newly constructed single-family homes has increased by about 50%, even as the size of the average family has declined. This paradox is explained by a demand for space to accommodate home theatres, offices, gyms and palatial kitchens. Bigger is deemed to be better.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show the average floor area of new houses increased from 162.2 square metres in 1984-85 to 247.4 square metres in 2005-06. In that time the average lot size has also decreased, from 750 square metres to around 450 square metres in New South Wales, although many are smaller.

But even though some consumers find big McMansion-style homes on small blocks appealing, an increasing number of Australians aren't subscribing to the theory that big is better. Constrained by space in the urban environment, clever design is driving an emerging architectural trend enabling home owners to fit big lifestyles into smaller spaces.

BIG IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER

So what is spearheading this trend for smaller sizes? There are a number of factors including the downsizing tendencies of ageing baby boomers, soaring home prices in much of the country, the desire of immigrants to live closer to transport hubs and urban centre, as well as a fundamental change in consumer tastes.

In the Sustainable Style exhibit at February 2008's international Decoration + Design Sydney trade fair, one of the installations attracting most interest was *Micro Maisonette*. This apartment design, aimed at

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generation Y residents, explored downsizing and the reinterpretation of the ideal home, employing innovative solutions with a less-is-more approach through double-duty furniture and efficient layout.

Dr Deborah Dearing, President of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in NSW, is not surprised that it attracted so much attention, saying that smart consumers are aware of the many home building options available to them, and rather than commissioning vast, featureless spaces, they have become very interested in the details, the quality (and eco-friendliness) of their inclusions, and above all, the efficient use of space.

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Affordable solutions

Builder Craig Riddle of Living Green Designer Homes became passionate about creating small living solutions in order to make homes more affordable to consumers. "Land values were so high and didn't look like coming down," says Riddle. "I knew we had to get to a cheaper construction price to be able to produce more homes on the available land."

After work on prototypes for two years, Riddle recently unveiled his smaller-sized solutions, designing rooms to have multiple purposes. "It's easy to make houses bigger," says Riddle. "That's a no-brainer. But it can be a challenge to achieve efficiency in a smaller area."

It appears that Riddle has overcome the challenge. At the 2007 Housing Industry Association (HIA) Hunter Regional Awards, the home design won three awards. Riddle's small sized houses (pictured right) translate into affordable building costs, quicker construction and fewer tradespeople required on the job. Riddle says construction costs have been reduced by 30% and the time required for construction has halved.

Choice of building materials has also played a huge part in achieving this. "Products like Scyon™ Axon™ cladding help us achieve three or four benefits at the same time," he says. "Our aim is also to try to get to a situation where we're only assembling the house on the site. It means less waste of materials and a more efficient use of the site."

VALERIE KHOO



Award-winning affordable homes featuring Scyon™ Axon™ cladding.

Small sites suit Scyon™

Melbourne architects Shelton Finnis were given a challenging brief by developer Pace Developments, for their mixed use project on the Nepean Highway at Bonbeach (pictured here). As the site was on one of Melbourne's busiest coastal thoroughfares, access was an issue. So was space. Pace Project Manager Matt Bridgman says they actually had no access or storage. "Pretty much everything had to be stored on-site."

A key part of the solution was a mix of Scyon™ products – Scyon™ Axent trim, Matrix™ and Axon™ cladding, and Linea™ weatherboard. According to Bridgman, "what's so much easier than having 80 pallets of blocks is four piles of Scyon™ Linea weatherboard or Scyon™ Axon all stacked up and covering exactly the same square metres. They're taking up less than a quarter of the space."

The fact that materials don't have to be shuffled around the site also means that construction goes much faster. "Overall, we saved at least four weeks," Bridgman says. "It was locked up so much faster." On cost, Bridgman feels that using block or brick "doesn't even compare. [These products] would save at least half," he says.

AMANDA FALCONER

As part of its ongoing member education program, Dearing says the NSW RIAA website hosts an online exhibition showcasing the architecture and design of small sites.

Called Tiny Sites – Small Site Architecture, the exhibition, which grew out of a series of professional development talks, contains a range of examples of design adapted to small site requirements and increasing density by prominent Sydney architects.

One of the most extreme examples of a tiny site is the very expensive 120 square metre Bondi property bought in early 2006 by a Sydney businessman. On this postage stamp, he plans to build a family home.

NOT SO BIG LIVING

US architect Susan Susanka started a national movement with her groundbreaking first book, *The Not So Big House* and her approach to design and lifestyle, which encourages both home owners and design professionals to focus on quality rather than quantity – what makes us feel comfortable rather than what impresses the neighbours.

According to Susanka's website, the inspiration for *The Not So Big House* came from a growing awareness that new houses were getting bigger and bigger but with little redeeming design merit. "The problem is that comfort has almost nothing to do with how big a space is," she writes. "It is attained, rather, by tailoring our houses to fit the way we really live, and to the scale and proportions of our human form."

Her rationale, aside from the economical and environmental imperatives of using fewer materials and less energy, is that our families are getting smaller,

and more and more of us are living alone, so it's lunacy to continue turning out huge homes when small ones work just as well.



"People kept getting more and more and more space but felt dissatisfied because the space was not filling a void," she told *The Washington Post* in 2007. "We found the moreness they were looking for had nothing to do with size but rather with the craving for more intimate spaces they could use in more practical ways."

Smaller homes are also equated with notions of sustainability. In a recent radio interview, Susanka said there are a lot of characteristics that make a home sustainable, starting with size. "If you're doing something that is right-sized for you as opposed to overly large, it's going to be something that people will want to look after for the long haul."

She argued that a smaller home will also be more sustainable in terms of its energy use and its consumption of natural materials. However, she said, an important and often overlooked part of sustainability is the physical beauty of the structure.

"When something is beautiful, it tends to be looked after for generations to come. Just look back at the bungalows of a hundred years ago, and you'll see that they've kept their value and their character, because people look after them. That's a big step in sustainability, even though we don't normally think of it that way." ■



Mcvalue for money?

The trend towards shrinking lot sizes with McMansions built on them in the suburbs started about 10 years ago, according to Scott Woodcock, Executive Director of the New South Wales branch of the Urban Development Institute of Australia.

"It was ushered in by a residential lifestyle development style that compensated for smaller lot sizes by providing local residents with a village lifestyle and access to pools, parks, tennis courts and community centres," says Woodcock. "Council rules changed in support of this, allowing houses to be built out to the boundary, where previously they had required substantial setback."

According to Jason Anderson, Senior Project Manager at Industry Research company BIS Shrapnel, factors influencing house size vary between cities.

"In recent years knockdown-rebuilds in Sydney's inner and middle ring suburbs have resulted in a massive two-storey home," he says. "Property owners then spent big across the board, looking to maximise the living space with a home cinema, larger bathrooms, a study, a guest room and rumpus room."