

Carr homes in on McMansions

Bob Carr is targeting energy-guzzling imitation palazzos in the suburbs, write **Tina Perinotto** and **Cherelle Murphy**.

Australia's McMansions – the big, energy-guzzling project homes fast spreading across the suburbs – are under challenge.

NSW Premier Bob Carr threw the first punch this week when launching NSW's contribution to the federally sponsored Year of the Built Environment initiative. He said it was time to reinvent project homes and his government would host a forum that could come up with some solutions.

Architects and builders say the other states will follow.

"Houses being built in western Sydney should incorporate the best design principles and reduce the stress on our environment, such as designing a house to maximise winter sun, cutting energy costs," Carr says.

If he has his way, owners of imitation palazzos on tiny blocks of land in new subdivisions will soon be made to feel as guilty as drivers of petrol-guzzling cars.

But if his attack offends anyone, Carr is unlikely to care. He's previously savaged the design of many modern apartment blocks.

There is a huge and growing move towards more sustainable housing, driven initially by environmentalists but now also by professionals working in design and development.

It's backed by new energy standards and rating systems, from the Building Code of Australia that works up standards to be voluntarily adopted by the states, to tough star-rating systems demanded by various state and local governments.

The move towards more sustainability has already hit the commercial sector, and business leaders such as Australand's Brendan Crotty and Investa's Chris O'Donnell are on record as saying it is the direction demanded not just by good corporate citizenship but by market trends.

But it will be harder to convince upwardly mobile first-home owners that big is not necessarily better, particularly when falling building costs, in relative terms, and low interest rates make "big" more affordable.



Bigger is considered much better.

Photo Brendan Esposito

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, Carr has solid statistical evidence for targeting McMansions.

In 2002-03, the average new home in NSW was 245 sq m in area – the biggest in the country and 53 per cent bigger than the NSW home of 1984-85.

Buyers elsewhere have also gone for the big is beautiful look.

But, although big houses seem more affordable, experts such as RMIT University adjunct professor Alan Pears say they contain a mountain of hidden costs.

Pears says that home buyers are in effect being duped – they're not getting more for less, they're getting more for more.

For instance, they can get 400 sq m of floor space for the cost of 300 sq m previously, Pears says you need to take into consideration the extra cost of

repainting, recarpeting, cleaning and, of course, heating, cooling and lighting.

"Once you start looking at the long-term cost of these large homes you realise the upfront cost is not really what you should have looked at," he says.

It will be much harder to convince upwardly mobile first-home owners.

Pears says cheap composite materials such as plywood, MDF and fibre cement are used as well, which reduces insulation qualities inherent in more substantial materials.

Master Builders Association chief executive Wilhelm Harnisch can see the debate is timely, but

SPACE INVADERS

Average floor area of new houses

	2002-03 m ²	% change 1984-85 to 2002-03
NSW	244.9	53.8
Qld	232.8	50.2
WA	229.4	23.7
ACT	228.7	53.1
Vic	222.4	36.0
SA	196.6	22.6
NT	182.9	35.2
Tas	177.6	18.5
Australia	227.6	40.3

Source: ABS

turning the tide won't be easy, he says. "Housing is a status symbol. The bigger the house the bigger the status. The trend is to bigger housing that reflects that people are earning higher incomes."

The advent of low interest rates has simply fuelled the trend.

At least one project builder, however, can see the writing on the wall and is determined to move towards more sustainable design.

General manager of Cosmopolitan Living, David Love, says his company – which operates in both NSW and Queensland – uses the HIA's Greensmart program and has engaged NSW president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Caroline Pidoock, to design sustainable project homes for a new estate in western Sydney.

Sustainable development is being "driven hard" by the state and federal governments, says Love, and his company has implemented a range of features such as AAA-rated shower heads and is looking at rainwater harvesting systems.

Love says in Queensland the company is also installing gas-boosted solar hot water services and is working closely with partners such as Stockland, Delfin Lend Lease and Landcom which, he says, are all "pushing the standards".

Will these measures cost more? "Of course", says Love – about \$1400 to \$1800 extra for gas-boosted hot water system and up to \$16,000 for a full photovoltaic cell system that can make enough electricity for owners to sell back to the grid.

Is the market demand there yet? "Not quite" Love says, but he adds that it will come.

Royal Australian Institute of Architects president, David Parken, believes Carr's swipe was merely a beginning. The debate will escalate around the country, he says, "absolutely".