

Cover story

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Just finished ... a house at Mullumbimby (right) designed by James Grose of Grose Bradley, which cost \$250,000 to build.



Good looks, nice price

Not all architect-designed houses cost the earth. **Stephen Lacey reports.**

About 5 per cent of the houses being built in Australia are architect-designed. One reason for this is that the cost of employing an architect can be prohibitive. However, you don't have to be a multimillionaire to engage an architect to design your dream home or at least a holiday shack. There are architects willing to take on projects with relatively small budgets who will deliver a design that meets your requirements within the budget that you set.

Even quite large homes (up to 400 square metres) don't have to cost millions of dollars (see Gabriel Poole below). The key is using less expensive materials, rather than bricks and tiles. The choice of site can also be a factor. Generally speaking it is cheaper for an architect to build something away from the city because labour costs are lower and there is less likelihood of problems with councils.

Even so, there are architects who can build a home in urban areas without breaking the bank, as architect Tony McBurney is demonstrating with his homes in Sydney's Hills District and Orange.

The president of the NSW chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Caroline Pidcock, says that using an architect can also save you money in the long term because a well-designed house is cheaper to run and maintain.

"If a house has been properly designed it will need less heating and cooling, because it will be oriented according to the prevailing conditions on the site," she says.

"It will also take less looking after because if it has been designed with the right materials for its situation, then they are going to be well protected and not going to need as much maintenance as materials that have been used inappropriately."

Here are some of the architects working on projects that needn't cause too much financial pain:

GABRIEL'S TAKEAWAY

Queensland architect Gabriel Poole has designed houses all over Australia, from Adelaide to a small island off Broome in WA.

His latest offering is the Takeaway, a home constructed from prefabricated sections that are transported to a site and bolted together. He's had many orders from around the country and has had some inquiries from Sydney.

"There's no reason why we couldn't build a Takeaway in the inner city," he says.

Poole has built several homes in the Sydney region but admits it can be a headache. "I refuse to deal with the Sydney bloody councils. It's just a long, drawn-out and expensive process that isn't covered by the fees I charge for these things."

He says it's difficult competing against large builders such as AV Jennings. "Project houses are propped up by the big building companies because they want to sell their materials. They are repetitive and very easy to build, so they can produce them at very low rates per square metre - \$500 to \$600 - we can't get anywhere near that."

Poole's response to this competition was the Takeaway. He says the idea was inspired by the relocatable buildings used by schools.

The houses are assembled in Brisbane and Bendigo (another site is planned for Sydney), right down to the plumbing and electrical wiring. Then the Takeaway is moved by truck, in a series of modules, and bolted together on the client's land. It takes about 12 weeks from when a client orders a Takeaway to when it's ready to occupy. The smallest of Poole's Takeaways, which has three bedrooms and covers 150 square metres, costs between \$150,000 and \$200,000.

The first of these buildings was transported from

Brisbane to Warwick, in Queensland, last week. It's the biggest building on Poole's menu, covers 400 square metres and needs 14 trucks to move it. Yet it took only three days to hook it all together. The cost was about \$1800 per square metre (\$750,000 in total), for a home with polished concrete floors and in-floor heating.

Clients can choose from several standard Poole designs or have a design adapted to the Takeaway system. The cost of a Takeaway starts at \$1000 per square metre and most are made from lightweight materials such as fibre cement sheeting and steel.

"My buildings are all designed so that they open and bring the outside in," Poole says. "I like my structures to give you the feeling you're camping out in the bush."

For more information visit: www.gabrielpoole.com.au or phone (07) 5442 4533.

MOORE FOR LESS

Despite the acclaim he has received worldwide for his remarkable designs, Ian Moore of Engelen Moore is not above taking on more affordable projects.

"I see a social responsibility to build low-cost housing, which is why I take on these jobs," he says.

Engelen Moore is working on two homes in Brisbane with a budget of \$210,000 for both. The homes are being built primarily from steel and plywood.

Moore has also been asked to design a \$100,000 house in Tasmania. The building will cover 150 square metres, which works out at less than \$700 per square metre.

"It's going to be incredibly difficult to achieve," Moore says. "I take those jobs on because they're a challenge."

"Not all architects are able to build a low-cost house because they haven't had any experience doing it - they're too busy building these great big monsters for people with too much money."

It was the Price-O'Reilly House in Redfern that shot Engelen Moore to fame in 1995. An uncluttered white box with a wall of glass, the house was built on a budget of about \$1000 per square metre and cost about \$300,000 in total.

Moore admits it would be virtually impossible to build anything in the inner city for less than \$2500 per square metre (about \$500,000 for an average three-bedroom house) due to the high labour costs and the time it takes to get a project up and running, especially when dealing with conservative councils.

Would you like chips with that? ... A Takeaway (below) designed by Gabriel Poole. Four-bedroom models cost from \$288,000 (231 sqm). One of 72 Engelen Moore townhouses now under construction at Auckland's Beaumont Quarter for \$336,000 (below right).



For more information visit www.engelenmoore.com.au or phone 9380 4099.

COLLINS AND TURNER

Penny Collins and Huw Turner have worked on partially prefabricated housing and are designing a high-quality kit-house system for a manufacturer in California (with a target price of \$1500 to \$2000 per square metre).

As well, Collins and Turner are working on several other low-budget projects. One, to be built at Umina on the Central Coast, has a budget of \$1500 per square metre. The finished project will cost about \$250,000. They are also working on a house at Randwick for about the same budget. "It's a challenge to build for that kind of money close to the city," Turner says.

Their work, like Engelen and Moore, has a clean, hard-edged appeal, reminiscent of the modernist architecture of the 1960s.

"We apply good design principles to materials that aren't often associated with residential design," says Turner. "We civilise industrial and commercial materials, such as steel and glass. We're interested in the sculptural tension of the building." Visit www.collinsandturner.com or phone 9356 3217.

INTEGRATED DESIGN GROUP

Tony McBurney's practice, Integrated Design Group, has created Sydney homes that may not look a lot different from the project homes around them but they are designed with greater environmental sensitivity and have interesting internal spaces.

McBurney has been working with Landcom, Masterton Homes and Cosmopolitan Living in areas such as Parklea and Kellyville on projects such as Homeworld 4 and the Newbury Estate.

"What's different is we're using standard construction techniques and materials and interpreting them in more creative ways," McBurney says.

An average three-bedroom house designed by McBurney on the Forest Glade Estate near Parklea will cost less than \$300,000, and the price includes

everything – even the land, driveway and landscaping.

McBurney doesn't only design project homes. He's building a house at Orange, where the brickwork is clad in corrugated iron, so the thermal mass is on the inside, "where it's supposed to be". Phone the Integrated Design Group at Bathurst on 6332 6206.

SOPHISTICATED SHEDS

James Grose, of Grose Bradley, says that many of his ideas are inspired by farm sheds, which he sees as the primary utility building in the Australian landscape. Grose has designed about 20 of these robust houses for their rural settings, with half a dozen of them around Byron Bay. He recently finished a house in Mullumbimby (near Byron Bay) for \$250,000. The house is steel-clad in Colorbond custom orb and has timber flooring and aluminium angles for sun control. He's also working on a small two-bedroom house near Murwillumbah for about \$200,000.

Over the years, Grose has designed several Sydney houses. These cost at least 50 per cent more than the equivalent home in the country. "We could do something for \$300,000 but it wouldn't be easy."

Call Grose Bradley on 8297 7200.

SMART SHAX

When it comes to housing, the Smart Shax is about as inexpensive as you can get. Designed by architect Ken Latona, just \$120,000 will get you in the door of a two-bedroom, 60-square-metre hut, with a toilet, a bathroom, a kitchen/living area and a deck. The outside is covered with Shadow Clad (a type of plywood) and the interior has plasterboard walls. Of course, there is the obligatory corrugated iron roof.

For an extra \$30,000 the Smart Shax can be made self-sufficient with a composting toilet and solar and gas power, making it ideal for isolated locations.

"We're getting a lot of interest from people who want to escape the city," says Smart Shax proprietor and builder, Martin Upton, who is in the process of building a Smart Shax for \$130,000 at Burradoo in the Southern Highlands.

Visit www.smartshax.com.au or phone 9974 1344.



Competitive edge ... The Collins and Turner entry in an American competition to design a home that could be built for \$US200,000 (\$304,000). It's made from polycarbonate and glass.



These are clever ... A Smart Shax two-bedroom hut in Wilsons Promontory, Victoria, built in 1998. The interiors are comfortable, stylish and filled with light. Today it would cost \$130,000.

Photo: Simon Kenny



Orange house ... The Integrated Design Group is building this residence in Orange for \$320,000. It has five bedrooms, three bathrooms and a granny flat.