

## Features

# Designer homes to go



*An affordable architect-designed home is not a contradiction in terms, writes Sandra Killen*

**H**ERE'S the ultimate in home delivery: You can have a top little architect-designed house delivered to your doorstep, and all you have to do is bolt it together.

Portable designer houses are the latest brainwave of energetic Sunshine Coast design team, architect Gabriel Poole and his artist wife Elizabeth who, with a delightful touch of wit, call them Takeaways.

They're a clever, affordable idea and they come in many configurations. A four-bedroom house of around 225sq m with Poole's trademark features such as breezeways and courtyards, for instance, will come in at under \$200,000 on your land. And if you find a better location, you can take the house with you.

It's proof that affordable architecture is not a contradiction.

In Queensland, without the big budgets of southern clients, architects are becoming masters of restraint, and are pushing the boundaries of innovation to get more liveable space out of less actual house.

This can mean incorporating the outdoor landscape within the internal boundaries so the garden becomes an integral part of the design.

It's true that today's architect-designed houses will still set you back

more than a comparably sized project home, but because the focus is no longer on the size of the house itself but on the quality of its spaces, you get so much more for your money.

Royal Australian Institute of Architects state president Wayne Petrie says the swing away from big houses is significant. "The number of rooms in a house has become less relevant," he says. "It's more about the usability of the space and the division of space by zones.

"The living/dining/kitchen area, for example, can be one pavilion, and this takes away the need to create more and more rooms."

Another trend is the use of non-traditional building materials such as fibrous cement or plywood cladding, which can be used in new ways that are refined and elegant.

"In Queensland's climate, you can get away with a lot lighter-weight construction," Petrie says. "We want our buildings to breathe and to have cross-ventilation rather than lock in the warmth. Quality insulation helps in the cooler months."

Economic housing is an issue that's very dear to the Pooles. Over the years, Gabriel's internationally acclaimed designs — that in 1998 earned him the highest accolade in Australian architecture, the Gold Medal — have



produced houses that address climate and lifestyle, are comfortable to live in, unpretentious and, most importantly, don't break the bank. He has long held a fascination for paring everything back and reducing the elements of a building to the absolute minimum — contributing more by leaving less.

Back at their Noosaville "Shed", the Pooles and their team are preparing their Takeaway houses for a Christmas launch. They're still in fine-tune mode, but everything's rolling along nicely.

The houses will be perfectly designed in width and height to fit on the back of a truck — or a barge if it's off to an island — and the "pods" are simply joined together when they reach their destination. They'll come complete with joinery, bathroom tiles and a 100mm polished concrete floor. Even the colour scheme is carefully considered.

The Takeaways are a direct result of

the immense interest nationally in Poole's modular Small House Series which hit the market earlier this year. The Small Houses, which come in a variety of designs and are linked together to form courtyards or larger plans, cost around \$850-\$1000 a square metre to build (most architect-designed houses cost \$1000-\$1500 a square metre).

But Poole is reluctant to sell his Small House plans to interstate buyers who use local builders to construct them — and over which he then has no quality control. Thus the Takeaways, which work out about \$850-\$900 a square metre, will be built in a Brisbane factory under the hawk-eye of Poole himself, right down to the door handles.

There's another positive spin-off of price-competitive design. As if to prove that architecture is not just for the rich, a housing development for disadvantaged youth at Deception Bay,

on Brisbane's northern outskirts, designed by Richard Kirk Architects, won the Brisbane House of the Year at this year's Royal Australian Institute of Architects regional awards. At the awards ceremony, the jury congratulated Kirk for extending good architecture into the everyday lives of the public. Kirk says his design for the eight Deception Bay units is simple and functional, and makes the lives of the occupants more pleasant with plenty of natural light, ventilation, comfortable-sized rooms, privacy and security.

He says the design quality of public housing is now firmly on the community and government agenda. Previously, a standard building type was used for public housing irrespective of where it was located, its site orientation and even the diversity of its occupants.

Now the buildings are purpose-designed for their site, climate, views,

CLOSE quarters . . . state Housing Department director-general Linda Apelt at the Bowen Hills complex and, far left, Gabriel Poole's Small Houses. Pictures: Ray Cash, Eric Victor

breezes and access to open spaces such as balconies, terraces or outdoor landscape, Kirk says. They vary in density, are more functional and respond to the needs of their occupants. It's a major turning point for social housing in Queensland.

One such development is a \$7.15 million complex of 70 units made up of boarding houses, one and two-bedroom units and studio apartments in Bowen Hills, on Brisbane's inner north side, which has just been completed. The project is the first for the Brisbane Housing Company, a non-profit organisation formed by the State Government and the Brisbane City Council to expand the availability of quality affordable housing, especially in the inner and near-city suburbs.

As part of the development, two historic cottages on the Bowen Hills site designed by acclaimed Brisbane architect Robin Dods in 1902 have been renovated into boarding house accommodation.

Project architects Deicke Richards, who designed the new buildings, and Gall Medek, who undertook the renovation of the Dods' houses, have given the Bowen Hills project a lively, contemporary facade and comfortable interiors which help give the occupants a sense of pride and belonging.

The development won a Royal Australian Planning Institute state award for Excellence in Planning last year and a national Urban Design/Plans and Ideas Award this year.

State Housing Department director-general Linda Apelt says the Government's affordable housing strategy will see 600 such units being built throughout Brisbane over the next four to five years.

Apelt says the Government acknowledges that good design in public housing is cost-effective, energy-efficient, contributes positively to the built environment and gives comfort and dignity to those on low incomes, resulting in a lower tenant turnover.

The State Government will contribute \$50 million to the Brisbane Housing Company, with a further \$10 million coming from the city council.

## Building on Brisbane's dream