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■ **PROPERTY**

Architects say small houses are the next big thing

Catharine Munro

ARCHITECTS have a message for anyone complaining about the cost of housing: if you don't like it, go small.

As if to prove that point, competitors for the Australian Institute of Architecture Awards in the recent category of "Small Project" include a beach house by Michael Dysart, who designed skyscrapers such as the Regent Hotel in Sydney during the 1980s.

Mr Dysart wanted to add an extra bedroom and living room to his waterfront fibro cottage at Wagstaff, on the Central Coast. Rather than using every corner of his large block, he kept it all within 100 square metres.

"In an era of conspicuous excess the fibro house is becoming rare," he said in his competition entry.

He kept his budget under \$200,000 and found many of the same materials in local hardware shops that had been used to build the house 50 years earlier.

Another entry, carrying the quirky name the "Almost House", was designed by John Wilkin and Susanne Pini as their home. At a cost of \$165,000 they renovated a semi-detached house in Annandale using recycled materials. The floor area is 120 square metres.

While there was strong interest among architects in well

designed, small spaces, the head of the institute's jury, Sam Marshall, said clients still thought big was better.

"It's very hard to convince clients to make their building small. They want the right size at the right price. But if they won't reduce the size, it's hard to do."

A report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in December found that the average cost to build a new house in NSW was \$272,000 and the average floor area was 252 square metres in 2007-08. Twenty years earlier the cost was \$67,000 and the average area was 181 square metres.

Catherine Chesterman, an architect, had the opportunity to buy a small semi-detached house in Erskineville next door to her sister to house her three children and husband, James McGrath. They built a house over 110 square metres at a cost of \$300,000.

Mr McGrath, an artist, had been reluctant to move. "[But] somehow it feels bigger than the other place, which was twice as big... it's because everything is uncluttered. You have what you need where you need it."

The family could not afford the cost of five frames at \$15,000 each to support the building. Mr McGrath found an alternative option through engineers' internet chat rooms at a cost of

\$450 each. Their engineer now recommends them to other architects. "Traditional construction really goes out the window," Ms Chesterman said.

The high cost of building a new house inspired the Queensland property developer Toby Lewis to set up a company last month selling pre-fabricated modular homes after plans for the house he tried to build took 18 months to pass through Brisbane City Council. Mr Lewis's product has also been shortlisted for an award by the institute.

He is aiming to sell a three bedroom pre-fab "Happy Haus" for less than \$200,000, and most of his inquiries have come from Victoria.



Architect-designed ... James McGrath and Catherine Chesterman at their Erskineville home, above, and the "Almost House" in Annandale, top left. Main photo: Steven Siewert