

# Small thinking goes big

It will come as no surprise to real estate watchers, but for the first time in Melbourne, land is more expensive than building, Hayball architect Rob Stent says.

"On the city fringes, the housing component is more expensive than land so the land needs to be smaller for affordability — and we can't waste land between houses," Mr Stent says.

This has pushed house and land packages in formerly affordable places such as Point Cook to around half a million dollars.

For the average inner-city apartment in a medium-rise project, the land component ranges from about \$60,000, depending on the location and number of apartments, plus around \$35,000 a car for a basement car park.

"So the more apartments you can get on the site, the better," Mr Stent says.

As roads clog with cars and the ageing public transport system strains under increasing demand, more people want to live close to their work. For 4 million of us, that's in the city.

Single-person households are the fastest-growing group, and as we all still like our own space to hang our hat, land use must be maximised.

But as spaces get smaller, they are also getting smarter as designers and planners take up the challenge of including all the mod cons of big houses into tinier areas. Public spaces such as lobbies include bars, lounges, dining rooms and boardrooms and even art installations.

Interior designers Andrew Wales and Tessa Roulston of Rothelwman, who specialise in near-city, high-density living, say all areas must be usable and passages and circulation space that can't be furnished must be kept to a minimum.

As urban dwellers, architects Vanessa Bird and Neil de la Coeur of Bird de la

## ARCHITECTS ARE MAKING THE MOST OF SHRINKING SPACE FOR CITY LIVING.



### HOW SPACE HAS SHRUNK

Most apartments have shrunk by about 10 square metres. In the case of a two-bedroom apartment, that's the equivalent of an average bedroom and bathroom.

Typically, a one-bedroom apartment has gone from 50 to 55 square metres to 40 to 45 square metres.

A two-bedroom has shrunk from 75 to 80 square metres to about 58 to 70 square metres.

Building costs range between \$2500 and \$4000 a square metre of "sellable" area, including public spaces and car parking, depending on the building complexity.

Profits, land, planning and consultants' and holding costs are added to this.



THE DEVELOPMENT AT 50 CLAREMONT STREET, SOUTH YARRA (ABOVE); ROTHLOWMAN'S DEVELOPMENT AT 150 CLARENDON STREET, LEFT.

Coeur, who live in Albert Park with their children Sidonie, 12, and Emile, 8, are familiar with the spatial challenge of city living. They say a vital aspect of this new dense living is how we live with and beside people, and understand shared space. The architects believe well-designed public areas help residents feel a sense of community although they might be living small and solo.

"In the old days a gym and pool were a selling point," Mr de la Coeur says. "Now they're an extension of the living space — it's their backyard if you like."

For Melbourne's last International Arts Festival, a pedestrian lane between Bird de la Coeur's development of residential and commercial buildings in

Yarra Street, South Yarra, was used for events. "It's a good space," says Mr de la Coeur. "We have meetings with our clients in the foyer of the office building. The key with smaller spaces is to make the public domain have manifold uses."

Another Bird de la Coeur development under construction, at 50 Claremont Street, South Yarra, has summer and winter lounges, with a pool and gym, a deck overlooking the city, fireplaces, barbecue and a cafe. "It's more like a resort for socialising than for exercising," Mr de la Coeur says. "Seating is arranged in groups so you can meet your friends and not feel socially isolated if you live on your own."

The couple believe the quality of light is also important in small spaces and must be bright but not dazzling.

They also try to make the structural frame flexible so people buying off the plan can join two apartments.

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CHRIS HAYTON: "PEOPLE OFTEN THINK THEY NEED MORE SPACE THAN THEY DO."  
PICTURE: CRAIG SILLITOE

### SKINNY CHIC

Chris Hayton, a principal at Rothelwman, is happy to swap space for the convenience of near-city living in Richmond. He and his children — Connor, 14, and Lucy, 10 — share a three-level, four-metre wide, 14-metre deep townhouse, one of 72 in a Rothelwman-designed complex.

That skinny space is as well equipped as a small suburban house. Past the front door there's a bedroom, bathroom and storage area, which the family uses for bikes and sports gear.

Upstairs is living space, with the kitchen separating a dining room/study at one end, and living room and balcony at the other. More stairs lead to two more bedrooms, two bathrooms and a cupboard/laundry.

Designer Andrew Wales explains that each house has street frontage, and windows at either end so there's cross ventilation and plenty of light.

Pale colours in the bedrooms — all with

mirrored wardrobe doors — make corners disappear. Traffic areas are polished Tasmanian oak.

Minimum space is taken for passages and the kitchen is walk-through. The gap, wide enough for someone to get past the cook, is about 1.3 metres separating a wall of cabinets, with a microwave and wall oven on one side and shelves, sink, hotplates and bench space on the other.

"I like having separate dining and living rooms," Mr Hayton says. "Lucy has less homework than Connor so she can watch television while he works at the table and I cook."

Built-in wall units have been kept to a minimum so owners can individually customise their spaces.

"I like living in a small area," Mr Hayton says. "Each is big enough for its function. People often think they need more space than they do. I'm a big advocate of well-designed smaller dwellings."

### CHANGING SPACES

**Kitchens** Appliances are integrated so the kitchen does not look utilitarian when it is part of the living space. Induction or ceramic hotplates can double for bench space and a convection/microwave oven cuts down on appliances. A mirrored splashback (also in bathrooms) increases the feeling of space. The 100 millimetres in the kickboard is often used for 600-millimetre-deep drawers for trays and platters. "When space is at a premium it all adds up," says Tessa Roulston of Rothelwman.

**Bedroom** With reconfiguring, a standard 1.8 metre wardrobe can be reduced to 1.2 metres by making it taller with pull-down racks and reworked shelves and drawers.

"Wardrobe drawers mean there's no chest of drawers taking up floor space," says Andrew Wales. Doors are mirrored to magnify space.

**Dining** Instead of a balcony some Rothelwman apartments have a winter garden with retractable double-glazed sliding panels so one table can be inside or out. This reflects the trend to flexible spaces. A meal table

integrated with the kitchen bench also does away with the need for a separate table.

**Bathrooms** A shower over the bath and a wall-hung toilet save space. In smaller apartments laundries are shared or space is outsourced to a laundrette.

**Living rooms** Keeping floor finishes uniform helps to merge spaces. A banquette seat against a wall in the living room can be used for storage and dining and means a table can be pushed closer to the wall, saving 600 millimetres.

**Study** A nook or alcove is useful but technology changes mean everything can now be run from a barely-there internet modem or benchtop computer.

**Public space** Lobbies are also bars, lounges, meeting rooms and even mini galleries. "So even if you have the cheapest and smallest apartment, you still have a rock star entry," says Vanessa Bird of Bird de la Coeur. Recreation areas or rooftops accommodate pools, barbecue and dining areas, "sky gyms" and even vegetable gardens.

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