

LUXURY HOMES

From worker's cottage to bijou palace

When it comes to houses, bigger isn't always better, writes **Anna McCooe**.

Could it be, the great Australian dream is downsizing? August Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show the average floor size for new freestanding houses has shrunk by almost five square metres in the past two years.

To be fair, our homes still rank as the largest in the world. We also know that houses within a fixed-gear glide to the city have held the most ground in the latest real estate slump and small residences require fewer resources to run. So it seems small might just be the next big thing.

An eco mindset, says interior designer Scott Walker, is laying fertile ground for the move. "Living a sustainable lifestyle has become a consideration in selecting a home. The McMansion effect on home design has forced many people to reconsider how they live and the space required to maintain that lifestyle," he says.

"Having access to public transport means that the desired location is now either within the city fringe or along transportation infrastructure corridors. People are also dusting off the bicycles as a means of getting around."

Walker is an Interior Design Award winner for residential interior design and head of interior design at Hassell. He says quality of life, for some, is born of proximity to others and not distance from them. "It's about being connected – a life spent in restaurants and cafes, as opposed to home cinema rooms," he says.

In fact, property adviser Chris Curtis, managing director of Curtis Associates, says the urban villages (think Balmain in Sydney, New Farm in Brisbane and North Carlton in Melbourne) hold the most allure. "There's definitely a fear of isolation emerging but there's also an affinity with community that comes from being close to schools, shops and transport," he says.

The luxury of time, too, is beginning to be prized over the



Left and above: Ross Street, Toorak, Melbourne, residence with interiors by Scott Walker of Hassell. Below left: Fitzroy North, Melbourne home designed by Nic Owen. Photos Shannon McGrath, courtesy Hassell, courtesy Nic Owen.

indulgence of space, as we eschew the quarter acre block in favour of high-density urban homes.

According to Walker: "Being closer to work means less time travelling and more time working or socialising. Smaller homes also require less maintenance, less time spent working in the garden or cleaning the gutters."

But as the cashed up mass migrate into the city, the humble terrace or worker's cottage – once urban slums – are crying out for an internal makeover to match their high-end price tags and timeless facades.

The widespread call may be to extend but there is a rising current of architects convincing homeowners to do more within the existing footprint.

"We call it caravan design – fitting a lot of functions into very small spaces," says architect Nic Owen.

His North Fitzroy residence, which took out the 2011 Abode award for best residential alteration, is a classic case in point. Double-height windows add vertical space within very small parameters while chameleon-like joinery provides storage.



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Nic Owen, architect

"People interact better in well-designed small spaces, you just have to make them work well and work hard," he explains.

Still, if the small high-end home can't boast seven bedrooms, rambling gardens and a home cinema, wherein lies the prestige?

"Luxury is in the quality of the fit out," says architect Andrew Parr, director of SJB. "It's about one larger space in lieu of several; so there are fewer rooms but each room is better designed with only the top specification of finishes selected," he says.

With a cosmopolitan lifestyle comes the opportunity to step out more, in which case, entertaining at home is more about drinks than dinner.

More facilities at one's doorstep means there is no need to bunker down with too many possessions.

Parr says a pared-back approach will magnify proportions in a small home.

"Keep furniture to a minimum," he says. "One large, comfortable sofa is better than two smaller ones, while a lightweight arm chair won't obstruct a space."

Parr lists built-in credenzas and shelving units as the key to serene

living zones and integrated appliances as a vital ingredient in blending open-plan kitchens with their surroundings.

"With less clutter, the focus will be drawn to a few key items," he says.

Palatial small spaces, for Walker, are all in the planning.

"It comes down to connected spaces. Zones are created but they are still open for a more efficient use of space," he says.

Walker's interior of the Ross Street residence features highly-resolved joinery and light fittings that lend the multifunctional living space an overall simplicity.

As such, the kitchen, living area and study each benefit from the others' territory for a sum that is indeed greater than its parts.

He explains: "Bespoke joinery allows studies, kitchens and even bedrooms to exist in spaces without four walls."

And so where square meterage, may be a sure thing a less tangible "sense of space" prevails.

The consensus? We can expect big things to come from bijou inner-city homes.

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