

new homes and development | Jennifer Stynes

Less is more

Project homes don't have to be big to be good, says the Premier, but the market says otherwise.

THE bullets will doubtless be flying at the Premier's Forum on Improving New Housing Design for industry and government on April 7.

When Mr Carr announced the forum, he said: "I'm not sure that project homes have the best variety of design and quality of design commensurate with affordability which we should be capable of achieving.

"We need to demonstrate that the best home is not always the biggest home."

That sort of talk will hardly be welcomed in places where the biggest home is definitely considered the best. And it doesn't go over well with Frank Death, chief executive of HomeWorld. "Project builders are catering for market demand. If they designed homes that the market didn't want, they'd never sell any houses," he says.

More than 13,000 project homes are built in NSW each year and they range from cheap houses (by Sydney's general standards) to homes befitting executive status. Death says that home building in NSW in 2003 is worth \$8 billion – \$4 billion of that in detached houses and townhouses. The top 30 builders accounted for 11,650 homes in NSW last year, he said.

A look at the HomeWorld website (www.homeworld.com.au) is illuminating. Among the many four-bedroom designs listed are: Allam Homes'



Rawson Homes' Newport 10, left and below.



Bennelong Point 35 (35 squares) at \$190,900; Rawson Homes' Newport 10 (30 squares) at \$224,500; Mirvac's The Somerset (24.3 squares) at \$115,900, and Mirvac's The Lodge (42.2 squares) at \$178,780.

Much of the criticism of these houses centres on their size. Death says councils have "plenty of input" into those sizes. For instance, in Baulkham Hills Shire, a single-storey house can't cover more than 65 per cent of the block, and a double-storey house not more than 60 per cent of the lot.

"Most developers are constrained by land size, because of a lack of foresight on the part of the government about infrastructure planning and

land releases," Death says. "In the past couple of years, it's been reduced from 600 square metres to 450 square metres [per lot]. That makes it very difficult for families with growing children, since builders can't take the house from boundary to boundary - there are plenty of controls."

He concedes that house sizes increased during the '90s as parents wanted retreats and entertaining spaces but were prepared to lose backyard space as the trade-off. "They don't want to live on top of each other within the home. And a lot of empty-nesters don't necessarily want a smaller home - I don't agree that at the age of 55 you want to move into a two-bedroom flat."

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The flexibility of project house builders has changed a lot, Death says. "Five or 10 years ago, if you asked for an extra bedroom or a bigger lounge room they would have said, 'Sorry, no way'. Now any builder will be flexible."

Death said that "80 per cent of the buyers are wage earners, so they can pay \$550 a square metre, not \$2000 for an architect-designed house."

As to the quality of the building, Death said he was willing to "debate with any architect, any council, until my last breath".

Ready to debate certain issues in project housing is Caroline Pidcock, president of the NSW chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. The first debate might be about what constitutes "a small block of land". Pidcock notes that plenty of houses in suburbs such as Paddington are on blocks considerably smaller

Bennelong Point, right; Mirvac's The Lodge, below.



than 450 square metres "but they show us that you can have good liveability on that size land". (Builders represented at HomeWorld may have a chance to practise, since Death estimates 80 per cent of their work is now knock-downs in established suburbs.)

"Obviously, I'm not saying everyone should live in Paddington-style houses, but as you get into tighter living arrangements you need better design," says Pidcock. "Some of the project homes have eight living areas, half of which can't be furnished because there are too many doors."

There is light at the end of the tunnel, though, in her view. "A couple of boutique companies are doing sustainable, well-designed projects and the rest will follow," says Pidcock, who is designing project houses for Cosmopolitan Homes.

Alan Sullivan is sales manager of Bellevalle Homes' house and land division. (Bellevalle is part of CPG Australia, one of Australia's biggest home builders with 10 divisions catering to different segments of the market.) He believes there's a greater variety of housing now than ever before.

"They haven't been building those fake Federation houses for 10 years now," Sullivan says. "Cost drives everything [in this sector] but, even so, the Sydney market is driving out the first-home buyers - 10 years ago, they were the buyers we catered for. Obviously, it depends where you buy but in Kellyville, for instance, houses cost around \$750,000."

Sullivan says it's "a sign of the times that first-home buyers want what their parents took their whole lives to pay for. They want a nice home, double garage, big-screen TVs, lots of rooms." To afford those things, they buy in regional areas such as the Central Coast and commute to Sydney.