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The future of cities: small footprint apartment living

KYLAR LOUSSIKIAN, SAMANTHA HUTCHINSON THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 11, 2015 12:00AM



Jane Caught's 44sq m Melbourne apartment relies on a communal deck and kitchen. Picture: David Geraghty

The apartment of the future will be smaller, perhaps lacking a full kitchen and laundry, but compensated with abundant facilities and communal space.

This is “collaborative consumption” as seen by some of Australia’s largest residential developers, who have stepped up internal efforts to find the future of living in cities.

The so-called small footprint approach long admired by some of the world’s most innovative architects has become a focus for Mirvac and Stockland, among others, as they tackle questions of affordability and increased density. Speaking at *The Australian*’s forum on the future of cities, Mirvac chief Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz said it seemed that younger people were seeking a different lifestyle.

“(There’s an) idea that not everybody needs one of everything and if the planning system could change and, indeed, the mortgage system could change, (it would) allow micro apartments with much more collaborative consumption of dining rooms and sitting rooms and so the bit you have to buy is a lot smaller and therefore the entry price is a lot lower,” she said.

However, planning regulations — and proposed minimum apartment sizes in Victoria — could stymie that push. The minimum size for a one-bedroom apartment in Sydney is 50sq m, significantly larger than some of the world’s cosmopolitan cities.



Architect Gary Chang in his 32sq m apartment in Hong Kong.

In Melbourne, Assemble Projects has had a longstanding interest in smaller apartments, producing a regular publication on “small footprint living”.

Assemble’s Ben Keck thinks the apartment of the future will not only be smaller, but also have a greater emphasis on communal and shared spaces.

Together with Wulff Projects and Icon Co, Assemble is planning apartments on Roseneath Street in Melbourne's Clifton Hill. Some of those apartments — studios are a mere 37sq m — would not be possible under standards proposed by the former Victorian government.

Mr Keck said a substantial amount of shared space — a multipurpose room, a large roof deck and a room for “washing the dog and fixing bikes” meant the current sizes worked.

Mirvac has begun working with focus groups to see what can be moved out of apartments, and what is a bridge too far, with the design team floating various models that include shared laundries, storage and dining. It expects construction cost savings of up to 30 per cent.

Thirty-something Jane Caught was raised in the wilderness on Tasmania's northern coast, but now owns a 44sq m apartment.

Financial constraints, a desire to live close to the centre of the city and mindfulness about living sustainably compelled her to take the plunge. “I knew it was a trade-off of finances versus the inner-city location, and so that was the choice I made,” she said.

Ms Caught uses the communal deck and kitchen regularly, but not necessarily to socialise.

Rather, she takes the air, enjoys the view and appreciates the space. “I had a big dinner party up there once,” she said, laughing.
