

Room with a view but little space

Michael Bleby

Cassie Lee moves into her new apartment next month. The one-bedroom unit in Melbourne's Abbotsford is small, but the single lawyer says she does not need much space.

Ms Lee is moving out of her parents' home in Melbourne's south-east suburbs and says her new home, on a tram line and just 3.5 kilometres from the central business district, was more important than a lot of private space.

"I spend a lot of time at work and there's not necessarily that much time spent at home," she says.

The 160-apartment Haven development has communal areas such as an outdoor retreat with a fireplace, a dining room and rooftop pool, where Ms Lee says she can entertain friends.

"I'm probably not getting a lot in terms of real estate - it's a 42-square-metre apartment with a five-metre balcony. If I need that bigger space to invite friends... there (are) those areas."

With young professionals increasingly choosing apartments over traditional detached houses for the proximity to jobs and centres of activity they offer, developers and designers are rethinking usage of the space in which

we live. But it presents a challenge both to architects and the planning regimes within which they work.

Some designers are already doing bespoke redevelopments to permit occupants to stay in apartments and make them useful for longer - such as when a couple has children - but more flexible use of space is becoming a mainstream offering.

Ms Lee is trading off private space for communal space.

"The savvy developers are on to facilities in developments that appeal to those people that want a typical suburban home, but can't afford the commute," says John Meagher, the managing director of marketing company 360° Property Group.

"So they're putting facilities in the development like common gardens, common dining rooms that can accommodate social activities like dinner parties, special occasions."

A separate development in Essendon in Melbourne's north offers one-bedroom apartments with a flexible wall that moves on runners to create a second bedroom, study or dining area.

"We have to try and find ingenious ways to find storage and be as flexible as we can with what we've got," says Fei



A new wave of young professionals buying apartments are trading off private space for communal areas.

Chau, who designed the Vivre apartments in Essendon for developer Monsoon Group. "We have to reprogram ourselves in do we need that much space and do we need that much stuff?"

A willingness to forgo, for example, rooms that are traditional features of a house but are little used - can go a long way towards promoting denser living, particularly in urban infill areas. Still, regulations have discouraged much of the design innovation that makes these possible and this week's Plan Melbourne blueprint goes further down

that road, says architect Tom Jordan.

Mr Jordan's firm Hayball designed Melbourne's first flexi-apartments in Carlton's Bravo development two years ago. He says concerns over rooms with no external windows letting in light, limit the subsequent use of innovations like moveable walls. Plan Melbourne, intended to prevent tiny or poorly designed apartments, also makes it harder to develop new types of more affordable apartments, Mr Jordan says.

"It does chuck the baby out with the bathwater a little bit. Innovation along

the lines of having moveable walls hasn't really been considered in these sorts of controls."

Not everyone agrees. Sydney architect Andrew Nimmo says the so-called SEPP 65 guidelines in NSW, which are similar to the new Victorian ones, do not necessarily stifle innovation.

"If the architect can present serious precedents of wonderful architecture in other places that show how clever design can squeeze out more in less, then that would get through in my experience," he said.