

Moving parts expand apartment living

Design A key to denser housing is the smart use of space.

Michael Bleby

The bed folds up into the wall and a dividing wall pushes back to create one large living space.

Welcome to Sanctuary, a development with convertible apartments in Melbourne's Abbotsford, which could be the future of how Australians live, or at least those who want to live close to the city without the money to spend \$1 million on a home.

"It makes your apartment effectively bigger," says Matt Malseed of private developer Hamton, responsible for the novel apartments. "You can have a dinner party that sits eight people in there. You can't do that in any other 42-square-metre apartment. It's also got a lot more storage in it."

Clever use of design plays into the heart of the debate currently raging about how to achieve denser living in urban Australia. While NSW and Victoria together make up more than half of last year's 197,972 apartment commencements, they have very different takes on how they should be done. You can't build a 42-sqm apartment in Sydney, where a one-bedroom unit must be at least 50 sqm under minimum size rules.

In Melbourne, you can – at least for now – but even as he moves towards creating guidelines for apartments, Planning Minister Richard Wynne appears more concerned with issues such as light and convenience than absolute size.

Doing more with less is an argument designers are keen to make.

"What we were hoping to achieve is a living space that is more flexible and can accommodate a greater variety of configurations and uses than if that wall was fixed," says architect Chris Hayton, whose firm Rothelowman designed the convertible unit. "It allows people a greater choice as to how they use their apartment."

It's not that movable walls are new. In Melbourne alone, they have already featured in Carlton's Bravo and Essendon's Vivre developments. What makes these different is the design work that makes it convenient to actually move them, Hayton says.

"You don't have to spend 10 minutes tidying up," he says.

"You don't have a stool beside the bed with your light and keys on and phone recharging. There's a little recessed shelf in the wall, so you can leave everything on that shelf when you



Architect Chris Hayton folds away the bed (above) and part of the apartment (left).
PHOTOS: VINCE CALIGIURI

move the joinery." Hamton only built seven convertible apartments out of the 193 in Sanctuary. They're more expensive – a convertible apartment costs \$415,000, more than the \$390,000 for a conventional one – and that doesn't even cover the whole cost, Malseed says.

"On a per-apartment basis, it probably costs about \$35,000 more, compared with a price increase of \$25,000," he says.

Economy-of-scale benefits from selling more would make convertible apartments cheaper, but the developer has no immediate plans to make more. They are also a niche offering, Malseed says.

"I don't see it as something you would necessarily do an entire building out of," he says. "You could if it was a

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small building in the right location."

But apartment design can only go part of the way. For denser living to truly work, just as much attention has to be paid to design outside the apartments.

If people have less space inside, policymakers and providers of infrastructure have to ensure that the surrounding environment offers good amenity in terms of transport, schooling, public space and shops.

"If we're going to try and encourage

families to live in apartments, if there are better apartments but there are no schools or parks nearby, you're still not going to get people moving from the outer suburbs back into the middle-ring suburbs," Hayton says.

"It's a very big-picture discussion. The infrastructure for people needs to be existing around them as well as good-quality dwellings."

It's a crucial equation that links the work of developers with authorities more closely than ever before. And a lack of clarity over the working rules – such as in Victoria, where there will be no rules until mid-2016 – makes it hard for developers to plan.

"It makes it uncertain," Malseed says. "We would need to see the details of how any regulation would be rolled out and the implications for projects."