

President's note

Since first arriving on the mountain some 16 years ago, I have been struck by the many beautiful, small houses in the two villages – many of them owner-built. There is much to recommend such housing. Cheaper to build, cheaper to run, easier to clean and, in the final analysis, much more sustainable in terms of overall resources consumed than their larger cousins, these houses also display some very beautiful architecture and design. This issue we thought we might have a chat about housing from such a perspective.

Houses & Power – the facts

A quick web-search under “small house movement” throws up many sites discussing “down-sized housing”, and what is also sometimes referred to as “the tiny house movement” at the extreme end of the spectrum. What, though, is the general standard in housing in Australia? Well, the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures suggest we have the largest houses in the world, increasing in size by 40% in the last 20 years (and now seeming to have peaked). At an average of 243 square meters (that’s roughly equivalent to a 2-storey house with a foot-size of 8m x 15m, or a single-storey dwelling 16m x 15m), we are 9% bigger than average New Zealand houses, 10% bigger than the US average, and 80% bigger than the Denmark average (which has the largest average house-size in Europe.) So our houses are BIG.

To power these houses in Australia, the average 1-person household uses 11 kWh/day in power. A 2-person house uses, on average, 14 kWh/day, and the 4-person household averages 21 kWh/day. (Check your electricity bill for your average daily use.) With the average SE Queensland house now sporting 2 air-conditioners, and a significant increase in appliances like large TVs and computers, according to the ABS the last decade has seen an overall increase in energy consumption per household of 30%. The addition

of a swimming pool almost doubles household power. With costs of electricity rising fast, power continues to be a significant cost for many, and has been a hot political topic for that reason in recent years.

Many households on the mountain, I know, use power at much lower rates than the average and many now further reduce their consumption and associated costs with solar panels. Some Mountaineers now generate such a surplus that they get paid from Energex (even after subtracting line costs, etc. that we all have to pay), rather than paying them! Other small local houses use up to 5-9 kWh/day. Size isn’t everything; quite the contrary in this case.

Of course, households can reduce consumption without reducing house-size. Just as with water consumption, through careful monitoring and smart choices we can sometimes significantly reduce power usage through simple measures. But unlike water consumption, we do not immediately see large power-draws in the way we are aware of taps running full-belt, so changing behaviours to manage consumption is much harder than with water usage. But modern electricity monitors can make power-usage as transparent as water-usage. Thus we can see what we’re using and what is greedy (e.g. water pumps and refrigerators), and make some efficient changes where possible.

All that being said, small houses and the benefits they bring are sometimes just the simple joy of a functional object, well-designed and well-built.

Dominic Hyde

Small House Movement

Throwing off the burden of ‘stuff’ is an ever more common aspiration, and what better place to start than your home? The Small House Movement is partly a response to the overwhelming overuse of the Earth’s finite resources: we are already using

more than one planet's-worth of renewable resources each year, and depleting the non-renewable ones just as quickly. This movement aligns with efforts to create modular buildings that vastly reduce construction waste and with the many people now attempting (and blogging about) 'zero waste': normal life without anything to throw out.

Several years ago, Australia overtook the USA at 'number 1' in terms of the large area of its houses. 'Small houses' are a response to this. Designers (often the people who are going to build and live in them) have a lot of fun with their planning to minimise building 'footprint' while maximising use of space. For example, each stair in a flight can have a storage drawer built into it (perhaps for shoes?) and floors can be fitted with a lift-up panel to access shallow storage that could easily hold canned foods or flat art materials. The aim (as in permaculture) is to design for multiple uses. There are many styles and interpretations — many very beautiful, some cosy, others cute — and a range can be seen in the book: 'Tiny Homes, Simple Shelter', by Lloyd Kahn. Space-saving ideas can be found in Japanese architectural books.

For many, the small house movement is a way to live comfortably and avoid the ties of a mortgage. For most it is a way to refrain from wasting resources and energy. Financial resources for the house can be spent on excellent insulation and 'airtightness' (instead of bank interest), thus alleviating the need for heating or cooling. The possibilities are endless, and usually lead to more freedom — and many friends coming over to get the blueprints!

Sarah Lowe

Know Your Natives Two Golden Beauties

Early summer is the time of the golden flashes of male Regent Bowerbirds as they gather with their ladies to feed on rainforest fruits.

This year our *Jagera pseudorhus* (foam bark) has had a prolific fruiting and the branches bounce and shake with feeding Regents. Both males and females blend in well, the males with their bright orangy fruit tones and the females with their speckled brown. When the males swoop out across open space they never fail to take your breath away.

Another of their favourites, *Synoum glandulosum* (scentless rosewood – not the hairy rosewood covered in the last issue) puts out its red fruits later in the summer as their second-course.

A local shrub from our wet sclerophyll forests that grows easily in mountain gardens is *Senecio amygdalifolius* (named for its leaves which resemble those of almonds in their shape). It grows to about 1.3m high and has dark green, somewhat fleshy leaves. In late winter/spring it produces clusters of large, bright yellow daisy flowers. It grows from cuttings and seed - some have even come up self-sown in our garden. They need pruning to keep them in shape but a plant can live for many years.

Sue Phillips

Editor's Note: As the rain pours down from Tropical Cyclone Marcia, Wompoo pigeons feed on the fruits of the local Bangalow palms (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*), now in late summer, in full fruit. Another bird-attracting local native.

Do your block!

Free bush care service

Would you like some assistance managing bushland on your block? Advice on weeds or advice on planting local native plants in your garden?

MEPA has a free service offering advice and information (supported by MBRC)

Contact Maggie - 3289 8175 or
Dominic - 3289 0093 or
Email: askmepa@yahoo.com.au