

DESIGN DIRECTION – *portable homes*



Pre-made and even flat-packed homes could be the solution for cash-strapped home renovators. Story by **Margaret de Silva**

It's the dilemma that every new home builder faces – how to cut costs and save time without sacrificing quality. But what if you could have a new home or extension delivered directly to your site and installed within weeks at a low price?

Welcome to the world of kit homes – and, according to developers, it's an area that will continue to grow as demand for low cost buildings and renovations soars in South East Queensland.

Toby Lewis is the director of Happy Haus, a company that specialises in architecturally designed prefabricated homes. Happy Haus has teamed up with architectural firms Donovan Hill, Owen and Vokes and Durbach Block to create three design series, which range from a single “pod” with basic living areas to a two-storey pod that acts as a stand-alone home.

Each module, or pod, is created in a Yatala factory by contractor Hutchinson

Builders, and designed to be transportable and adaptable. Lewis points to the very first Happy Haus project, designed by Donovan Hill, to highlight the flexibility of the Happy Haus concept.

The house was installed at Point Lookout on North Stradbroke Island in mid-2009 and consisted of a Donovan Hill DHAN series base pod, which included the living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, as well as the DHAN expander

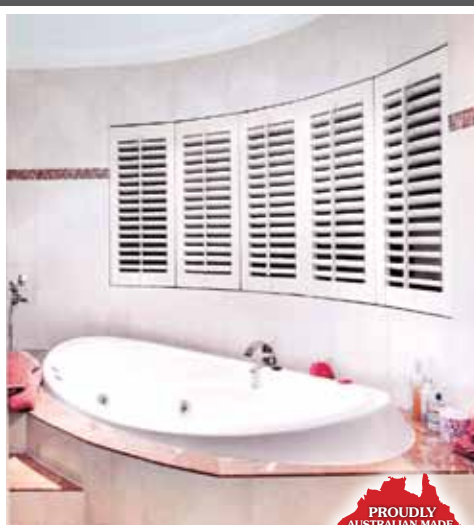
This Stradbroke house is created from a series of pre-fabricated pods

pod, which was essentially a large sleeping area. The client worked with Donovan Hill to position the pods in a way that took advantage of the site's sweeping views and would allow for an extension that could be added at a later date.

After living comfortably in the home for about a year, last year the client worked with Donovan Hill to add a downstairs outdoor area that connected the two pods, as well as two extra bedrooms, an outdoor covered sleeping area and a rooftop terrace above, which was completed in November. Lewis explains that the house was built as a holiday home for two families who wanted a cheaper alternative than traditional on-site buildings but always planned to expand once they had the additional budget.

Donovan Hill director Brian Donovan says the advantage of starting with the pre-fabricated pods was that they could be easily adapted. “Happy Haus are a complete house from day one but then they are also easily extendable, or adjustable or removable,” he says. “In time, for example, these buildings could be taken off site and taken to another place.”

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The Straddie house is typical of Donovan Hill's design in many ways. The exterior stained plywood sits as a backdrop to the spectacular landscape and the interiors include painted plasterboard and timber frames on the doors and windows. Each pod is long and narrow, which was necessary for transportation, but also allows for good cross ventilation. Importantly, Donovan says the layout means that the spaces can be used for different needs. "In contemporary housing it's important to have a lot of generic spaces that you can use for any number of reasons," he says. "The bedroom could very easily be a library or an art room or a guest room."

Toby Lewis says the biggest benefits of prefabricated homes are the cost and time savings. For instance, the original Happy Haus pods at Straddie could be used as a two or three bedroom home, and the two pods cost \$155,000 and installation was \$100,000. In this case, the installation costs covered additional hurdles, such as transporting the pods to the island, building on a remote site and including septic tanks, but generally installation is between \$40,000 and \$100,000.

The original house was built in five weeks and installed in under two weeks. Costs are kept down by constructing the pods in a factory, where contractors work on a production line, and the design is already certified, so clients do not have to pay for a certifier, structural engineer



Pods can have a number of uses

or architect as they would if they were building a standard home.

If you're just after an extension, you could also consider a flat-packed studio, such as those designed by Sunshine Coast-based company SmartStudios. Builder Dennis Pradella started the company with wife Nicola early last year after returning from a year abroad in Germany, where the flat-packed backyard teenager's retreat, studio or extension is more common.

Unlike the European log cabin designs, Pradella's flat-packed studios are made from hoop-pine, use a panel locking

system and are installed on-site by a registered builder. Eventually Pradella intends to allow for an option that would enable the owner to employ their own contractor to install the studio, which would keep costs even lower.

He says he is focused on the "backyard" market and has already created art studios and teenager retreats for homes on Bribie Island and in Brisbane. He says the alternatives are limited for people who want an inexpensive, additional room that has been properly engineered. "The cost of building a one-off extension can be astronomical," he says. In contrast to Happy Haus pods, the SmartStudios are assembled on-site which means they don't require a crane to access the site. "Basically if you have a pathway, you can have one of these studios," Pradella says.

Different sizes are available, from a four by four metre studio with or without a deck, to a five by four metre multi-room retreat and, depending on the site, studios can be built in less than a week.

Pradella has already updated his original design to include large, sliding glass panels and now has his eye on the housing market – currently designing a larger-scale building which could potentially be used as a stand-

alone home on a site.

Of course, like any extension or renovation, SmartStudios and Happy Haus projects are still subject to building approvals and soil tests, and time frames



Pradella's SmartStudios arrive in a flat pack

depend on council approvals. But directors of both companies say the costs are significantly lower than traditional builds.

Toby Lewis expects demand for pre-fabricated homes to increase as the building industry is stretched by the mining industry and, more recently, the flood recovery. "I think more and more, because of the time and cost savings, developers, governments and mining companies will continue to house people in pre-made products...our customer base will only continue to grow."

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