

“We sat down with a coffee and watched it go up,” says engineer Rob Booth about the prefabricated house he calls a “funky sheering shed” (with wife Genevieve).



# THE SHACK IS BACK

THE NEW BREED OF WEEKENDER IS FUN, FUNKY AND PREFAB, OWING MORE TO '50S FIBROS THAN FIVE-STAR RESORTS.

STORY JANNE APELGREN

**E**ngineer Rob Booth's new weekender shocked the locals when it went up in a paddock outside Halls Gap in Victoria's Grampian ranges last year, and not just because of its unusual design, which the Melburnian describes as "a funky shearing shed".

The house got neighbours talking because, quite simply, one morning it wasn't there ... and by the same afternoon it was. The 43-year-old laughs at the memory. "We sat down with a coffee and watched it go up."

The climbers' retreat Rob and Genevieve Booth built is one of an increasing number of prefabricated houses coming from some of the world's top architects. This new breed of "fab pre-fabs", as an international design website has called them, are ingenious, environmentally friendly, quick to build – and cheap.

But most of the architects working with prefab say their appeal is not just about the money. "Beautifully designed, simple places" are the allure, says Melbourne architect Andrew Maynard. Somewhere simpler than what you have at home – a shack that catches its water supply from rain on the roof and generates its own power. Somewhere that can be cleaned in a few minutes and packed up even more quickly. And something that can be finished in eight weeks for around \$100,000.

"The pre-fab housing movement is growing around the world," says Rob Colquhoun, whose company built the Booths' Grampians house. Architects globally are rising to the challenge of creating affordable, functional and sustainable housing for some very

special situations. In Japan, Toyota is factory-building typhoon and earthquake resistant houses using automotive technology. Among Australian architects, Gabriel Poole's prefabs have gone into remote Aboriginal communities, and housed park rangers. Andrew Maynard is exploring whether his prefabs will work in mining communities, or in markets such as India, which clamour for affordable housing. Sean Godsell's Future Shack uses a shipping container to provide emergency housing after natural disasters.

But most of Australia's architect-designed prefabs end up as weekenders at the beach or in the bush, where they can go up with a minimum of fuss or damage to their sites.

When eco-tourism pioneer and architect Ken Latona designed cabins for holidaymakers on Victoria's Wilsons Promontory, so many guests coveted them that Latona allowed builder Martin Upton to market them as semi-prefabricated weekenders called Smartshax. With the simplicity of your childhood beach-house, but sensitive and modern design, they are inexpensive escapes for coast and country, and can be built completely "off the grid", with solar power, composting toilets and water tanks. Latona is a firm believer that Australians need to "reconnect with nature", and intends that buildings like his Bay of Fires Lodge in Tasmania, as well as his Smartshax, will allow that to happen. One client, a Sydney banker, cited nostalgia for the Queensland holiday house of her childhood, with its sleep-out, as the kind of feel she wanted for her weekend escape.

Many such baby boomers recall with affection the cosy evenings of their family holiday shacks – before rumpus rooms and studies and home cinemas and wireless internet. So a house that brings people together, rather than encouraging them to drift apart, is on many buyers' agendas. One Melbourne architect working on a country house for a wealthy client was given the brief not to build a big house where "everyone ends up in their own room doing their own thing, and I end up in the kitchen on my own". The size of most pre-fabs (governed by the need for them to fit on a semi-trailer for delivery) makes them the perfect cosy retreat.

Sometimes such shacks are a toe-in-the-water of a sea-change town, and will be added to when the owner retires. Sometimes they're just an antidote to the complications of urban life – and recognition that busy lives mean many modern weekenders might be lucky to get a visit one weekend out of eight, therefore it's foolish to invest too much in them.

So are big five-star-resort-style holiday houses losing their appeal? Several architects said clients cited the expense, work and energy required to run a big second home as motivation for buying something simpler where they wouldn't be cleaning guest bathrooms, or finding and packing belongings strewn around a big weekender. Is it surprising we long for the old days when leaving on a Sunday night meant shutting the curtains, turning off the power and locking the front door?

Queensland architect Gabriel Poole says: "People don't need these bloody big houses, with theatre rooms

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big enough to house a whole family in. If you build a big house, you should be housing three generations in it," says the architect often credited with reinventing the Queenslander for modern times, and who now creates his own line of prefabs. Poole believes we'll begin to reject houses that cover the whole block. "They're houses for showing off to someone else. I think there will be a move away from them, and they'll become difficult to sell."

Poole's prefabs, called "Takeaways" are constructed in a Cairns factory and assembled on site. Between 25 and 35 have been built so far in Queensland and the Northern Territory for private clients, Aboriginal communities and park rangers. They're cheaper than conventional architect-designed houses, can go up on site in as little as 24 hours, and are able to use interesting green technology, such as a cooling system which draws air up from pipes buried in the ground below the house.

Young Melbourne architect Andrew Maynard agrees people are being drawn to simpler dwellings for ideological reasons. "The green issue is coming to a head for many people," he says. They want energy-efficient houses with simple but beautiful design. Through a partnership called Prefab House, he's

→ THE GREEN ISSUE IS COMING TO A HEAD FOR MANY PEOPLE. THEY WANT ENERGY-EFFICIENT HOUSES WITH BEAUTIFUL DESIGN. ←



"Camping with doors," says builder Martin Upton of Smartshax designed by Ken Latona.

taking orders for modular houses, constructed from steel-lined styrene panels, "like a giant Esky", he laughs, and priced from \$33,000 per module up to \$47,000 for a bathroom. The first is going up in Victoria's Strathbogies ranges, off the energy grid and with a 7-star energy rating according to Maynard, who aims to bring the car industry's production-line process to the building industry. He is planning to have clients' houses on the back of a truck for delivery eight weeks after they've ordered.

Already operating on that timetable is Melbourne builder Rob Colquhoun, who says, "We work on taking six to eight weeks to build the house in our factory, one day to deliver and install, and five days to finish." It's a process that lends itself to remote and environmentally sensitive locations, and much of his business is building holiday homes. Colquhoun's company, Prebuilt Housing Solutions, built Rob Booth's Grampians house, and has constructed about 80 other prefabs in Victoria, NSW and Queensland, including a two-family retreat in the snow country, and a fully-solar country house with worm sewerage. Rob Booth, a Grampians owner, says: "I'm pretty straightforward, but I wanted something a bit different, architect-designed, not one of those kitschy, cottagey looking places."

Part of the prefab's appeal is that owners like Booth don't have to spend a year trekking to a building site to check on their weekender. There are other benefits too. A fixed price, for starters. And with such a short time on site, less risk of weather delays. Then, if you grow out of a prefab, you can usually just add another module.

Finally, when you decide to move, you can actually take your house with you. And wouldn't that take the neighbours by surprise. ☺

## ←FAB PREFABS→



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### →PREBUILT

Rob Colquhoun's Victorian company is the pioneer of modern prefab in Australia. "None of our clients would consider conventional kit homes," he says, hence the appeal of Prebuilt's often edgy designs which are scattered from the snowfields to the sea. Most carry price-tags from \$90,000 up, though cheaper are available. The company's Kilsyth factory has eight houses under construction at a time, they're built in six to eight weeks, delivered and installed on site in a day, and finished in five. [www.prebuilt.com.au](http://www.prebuilt.com.au)

### →THE E-BODE

Having your architectural work on display next to the Sydney Opera House would be daunting for many architects, but that's just how Paul Lucas and Sarah Bickford's first prefab e-bode made its 2004 public debut to promote a "houses of the future" exhibition. Their prototype is on display at Broke in the NSW Hunter Valley, and their first customer takes delivery this month (June) of an e-bode built by an Albury manufacturer. The pair's company, modabode, aims to deliver houses 12 weeks from order, priced from \$129,000. [www.modabode.com.au](http://www.modabode.com.au)

### →SMARTSHAX

"Camping with doors," is how builder Martin Upton sums up Smartshax, designed by the architect and eco-tourism pioneer Ken Latona. Delivered to site partially pre-fabricated, erected in six weeks by two builders, and priced from \$162,000 plus GST, Shax can be built "off the grid" with solar power, water tanks and composting toilets. There are completed Shax now across three eastern states. [www.smartshax.com.au](http://www.smartshax.com.au)

### →PREFAB HOUSE

Architect Andrew Maynard's website shows one of his prefab houses perched on top of a high-rise building, turning a dull rooftop into a penthouse suite. In reality, his first prefab will go up this year somewhere far less urban – off the grid in Victoria's Strathbogies Ranges. Maynard's partnership is aiming for a timeline of eight weeks from order to delivery. He is currently taking orders for the houses, which are composed of modules priced from \$33,000 to \$47,000. [www.prefabhouse.com.au](http://www.prefabhouse.com.au)

### →PLATFORM 1234

The holiday cabins Rita Qasabian designed for her parents' farm on NSW's south coast inspired the same emotion in many visitors – they wanted their own. So Qasabian's architectural firm, Studio Internationale, began the process of creating a range of prefabs which would satisfy the demand. Their showcase building will go up on the NSW south coast this year. Pricing and other details are to be finalised, but Qasabian says it's safe to assume going prefab will cost \$1000 per square metre less than a normal architect-designed house. [www.studiointernationale.com](http://www.studiointernationale.com)

### →TAKEAWAYS

"They can be built almost anywhere," says Robin Boyd medal-winning architect Gabriel Poole of his Takeaways prefab kit houses, which are manufactured in Cairns. Around 30 have already been built in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Known for his modern tropical houses, Poole's designs are also famous for taking advantage of nature to heat and cool them. Fully finished houses priced from \$118,000; kits from \$68,000. [www.gatewaymanufacture.com](http://www.gatewaymanufacture.com)