

An architect for everyone

An award-winning architect and one of the state's biggest building companies have teamed up to provide high-volume, affordable housing which is also environmentally sustainable. DEBORAH BOGLE reports.

THINK architecture and the vision that comes to mind is likely to be of a striking public building, a city high-rise or the kind of high-end house that makes the pages of glossy design magazines. Think suburbs, on the other hand, and the image is of row upon row of cookie-cutter houses, boxes set squarely on ever-smaller blocks, with slight variations in materials and facade as fashions dictate.

Residential architecture is about one-off “design gems”, as Max Pritchard calls them. The suburbs are about high volumes allowing the production of houses for the lowest possible price.

Rarely, if ever, do the two meet.

Max Pritchard's reputation as one of South Australia's leading architects has been built on the mid-to-high-range market – those “design gems” that have won him numerous awards. But our leading architect has an enduring interest in low-cost housing.

A decade ago, he designed a house at Ingle Farm, built for around the same cost as the standard suburban homes of the time.

Created around the kinds of energy-efficient principles that had yet to become part of the mainstream conversation about building and design, it was as different from its neighbours as charcoal from cheese. There were complaints. “It was a conserva-

tive suburb with new little boxes around it and it finished up on national television with the neighbours saying how ugly it was,” recalls Pritchard.

Happily, he now has the chance to realise those goals on a scale that has proved impossible until now. With his reputation secure, he's going out on a professional limb, bringing the principles of good, sustainable design to the housing of the suburbs.

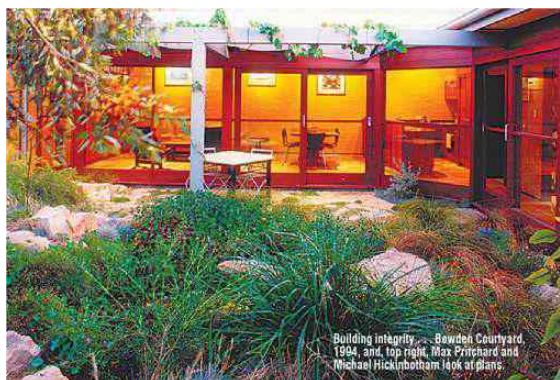
This has come about through a partnership with the state's largest and longest-established building company, the Hickinbotham Group.

Instead of being the preserve of less than 5 per cent of the population, architect-designed homes will be within reach of the people who make up the bulk of the market: first-home buyers, couples with young families, retirees.

Pritchard will produce a series of standard designs for Hickinbotham's affordable housing range. Each will be designed to suit the particular orientation of the site.

“That's something that's not done at the moment,” says Pritchard.

He describes them as houses that will be “designed from the inside out”, built around courtyards that are the focus of the living areas, rather than the “little mazes” that are the standard offering in affordable housing. Rather than bricks or “monolithic render”.



the materials will be lightweight and “fresher”. Cladding will be corrugated iron, plywood or fibre-cement; floor plans will be efficiently oriented around courtyards that are integral to the design and thus reduce the amount of indoor space required; and so keep costs down.

“The whole concept of usable outdoor space, encouraging people to live outdoors as much as possible, is good, it’s sustainable and it’s much better living out under your vine-covered pergola than inside airconditioned rooms,” says Pritchard.

“To me, that’s one of the core (principles) of sustainability.

“You don’t need as much living space if the houses really relate to the outdoors. It doesn’t matter how sustainably you try to design things; there’s not much point if everyone wants to sit at 22 degrees under their airconditioners all the time.

“But if they haven’t got anywhere else nice to be – in their shaded courtyard in summer or their sunny courtyard in winter – there’s a lot of energy wasted in heating and cooling places that might not be necessary.”

Producing such a house within the \$100,000 range that makes up the bulk of the housing market would be almost impossible were it not for the buying power and economies of scale that can be achieved by a builder of Hickinbotham’s standing.

In the affordable housing business, design principles tend to take a back seat to a market driven by cost. And, until now, few architects have been inclined to take up the challenge of designing for that market.

Long before the approach by Hickinbotham, Pritchard had been browsing the display villages, trying to work out how to apply better design to the mass market. “That’s one of the big advantages of teaming up with Hickinbotham,” he says. “With their buying power and their whole organisation, they’re able to build more cheaply, and if we can get those benefits of economical construction with some good design then I think we’ve got something unique that hasn’t been offered by anyone else.”

Pritchard’s vision for affordable housing hasn’t been confined to his own backyard. In 2005, he began working on plans for a series of standard homes for a building company in Fiji.

“They’re a poorer country so their market is really economical,” he says.

“The houses I was designing were from about \$40,000 to \$45,000.”

Hickinbotham initially approached Pritchard to design a series of houses for the development at Lochiel Park, on the Campbelltown riverside park that includes historic Lochend House.

With a mandatory 7.5-star green rating for

all buildings on its 80 allotments, the Lochiel Park development is promoted as a showpiece for principles of green design.

Hickinbotham is one of four builders who successfully tendered to build high-density housing according to strict sustainability guidelines. Solar panels, recycled stormwater and electricity demand limiters will be included on each dwelling.

Michael Hickinbotham says the company was drawn to Pritchard because of his commitment to sustainable architecture.

“Max has come up with some fabulous designs that marry the principles of sustainability with good living,” he says.

The Lochiel Park houses will be built under

Hickinbotham’s new Charter House brand, which will also offer one-off Pritchard designs for individual clients.

He’s also working on designs for high-end riverfront housing in Hickinbotham’s marina development at Mannum. Prices for the Lochiel Park homes start at \$294,000, well beyond the reach of those buyers Pritchard hopes to house in his low-cost designs.

Hickinbotham, however, welcomes the idea of designs for their affordable housing range. “What I like about Max is he’s passionate about well-designed, affordable housing,” says Hickinbotham.

Through its Hickinbotham and Statesman brands, the family company, Construction Services Australia, will build more than 1000 houses this year.

“That puts us in a unique position, because we can marry our buying power with Max’s intelligent design to provide good value for money in the Charter House range at the top end of the market, with unique, one-off designs, as well as the volume side of the market,” says Hickinbotham. “So we’re really excited about the association.”

In a profession that prides itself on attention to detail, not all architects would welcome the prospect of handing over so much control to a builder.

For Pritchard, this is outweighed by the potential to make an impact in the biggest housing market.

You’re getting a lot more built, and there’s the chance of having an influence on others of making more impact than you do with the little one-off gems,” he says.

He’s untroubled by the possibility that some of his professional colleagues might think he’s selling out, or lowering his standards. “That’s the problem, that architects might have been a bit too elitist and that’s why they haven’t been able to have much involvement in housing, full stop,” he says.

“For the profession to have some relevance, you’ve got have some influence on

how people live.”

Maxwell smart

Maxwell Robert Pritchard

Born: 1947, raised on Kangaroo Island.
Bachelor of Architecture, University of
Adelaide, 1970.

Travelled widely and served long
apprenticeship on building sites in various
trades, then in small architectural office
before starting his own practice in 1986.

Awards

Sir James Irwin Royal Australian Institute of
Architects SA Chapter President's Medal,
2004.

RAIA Awards of Merit: 2002 (Southern
Ocean Retreats); 2001 (McLaren Vale
House); 2000 (Richards House, Turner
House, below).



Commendations: 2005 (for sustainable
design and residential categories, Maxwell
House); also commended in 2004, 2001,
2000, 1998, 1994, 1992 1988.

Awarding the President's Medal, Francisco
Bonato, president of the RAIA SA Chapter
said: "The work of Max Pritchard speaks
eloquently of its unassuming creator: deft,
grounded and genuine. (He has) quietly
built a reputation and following as an
architect of people and place, unaffected
by the transient trends and fashions swirling
around him . . . His approach embodies an
empathy and humility which . . . is seen as
lacking in our profession."



Grand
plans . . .
Artist's
impression,
top, and sketch
plans for
Pritchard's
Green House to
be built at
Lochiel Park.

