

Box Clever

(Featured in NZ Herald October 2009.)

The Advertising Standards Authority recently upheld a complaint from the New Zealand Institute of Architects that an advert which mentioned ‘blowing the budget’ and ‘architect’ in the same sentence was misleading. Unfortunately, the damage has been done and the ensuing media comments (of which this commentary is equally guilty) serve only to prolong an uncomfortable episode that architects would only too soon see disappear.

It is interesting that the house company involved felt threatened enough to denigrate architects, and a pity that the efforts of the NZIA, more often than not, go into defending architects rather than promoting them. Nevertheless, whether true or not, the advert picked up on pretty widespread public sentiment. Architects are perceived as being ‘expensive’ and yes, budgets do get ...well...stretched. This is why architects are often criticised for only ‘designing for the privileged’.

Which leads me nicely onto what I really wanted to talk about: wouldn't it be great if you could have an architect design your home for a fraction of the cost of a bespoke house? And, that you had the certainty of building costs that house companies offer? Well you can, but not in New Zealand... until very recently.

The term ‘modular housing’ has no doubt turned you off already and I wouldn't blame you for moving onto the next article. It sounds a bit like ‘prefabricated’ and lacks the romance you would expect from something designed by an architect. The fact is that around the world, modular house companies have been building interesting homes costing significantly less to design and more efficient to build than a bespoke house, while benefiting from architect input. It has in fact been done since the late 18th century, and names such as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Thomas Edison (yes, he of light bulb acclaim) saw modularisation as a panacea for home design and build.

Where modular homes win is that they use a set number of standardised components that can be put together in different ways to suit a client's brief, site and budget. While it constrains a client to set proportions, the claddings, floorings and finer details can all be selected. Since each ‘module’ has been pre-designed and previously built, all the architect needs to do is to figure out how to join them, and work with client on material selections. The theory goes that you can achieve thousands of bespoke configurations from a small number of modules, which will be quick and cost-effective to build.

Unfortunately, a lot of post-war building killed off a burgeoning prefab and modular housing movement. The buildings were simply dreadful, responding more to the need to get homes built fast than considering an aesthetic or long-term agenda. And then some, designed by the likes of Buckminster Fuller were just simply wacky.

A New Zealand company aptly named ‘Box Living’ has been developing a system over the last couple of years to revive the idea of modular homes. The design has roots in

the modernist movement of the 1940's and 50's through architects such as Ellwood and Koenig, who predominantly used steel frames to create angular shapes and large expanses of glass. Instead, Box has used local engineered timber beams and posts to achieve the same striking forms, and a system that can use different cladding and linings, based on a client's preference.

Box Living, and some of their clients believe they're on to a winner. Not only do the houses look fantastic, but also give clients the ability to get the value of an architect without having to pay for one. Clients get the attention to materials and finishings, while the house is built quickly and to a fixed budget. Since the modules of the house have all been pre-designed and detailed, the design fees are significantly reduced. Of course, you have to like the clean simple elegance of modernism, but the company is working on more traditional design styles.

The building industry hasn't progressed very far over the ages – it is still a messy, cumbersome and often imprecise business. The great thing is that companies like Box Living are coming up with ideas of how to promote the value of architecture while looking at different business models that can spread good architecture to the masses at an affordable price. It is ideas like this that are needed to change peoples' perceptions of architects and put good house design within reach of us 'less privileged' folk.

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