

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Master Builders director Michael McLean recently returned from a visit to Sri Lanka and Singapore; he reports on how our housing and lifestyle compares.

ALTHOUGH Australia, Sri Lanka and Singapore may all be islands, our lifestyles and housing forms vary considerably.

Singapore may only have a population of 5.6 million, but it is a relatively small island comprising an area of only 721.5sq km. It has planned its built environment around an efficient and economical below-ground metro rail transport system, a multitude of taxis and buses as well as excellent roads and freeways. Interestingly, tolls apply only during certain hours of the day to discourage congestion through the use of private cars.

Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is in a much earlier stage of development, with a road network, apart from a few toll-funded expressways, that can only be described as organised chaos. Trains and buses may well be available, but thousands of tuk-tuks (three-wheeled taxis), scooters, motor bikes and cars compete for every inch of space on some very poor and dangerous roads. The sound of horns is the language of survival on the roads.

Singapore is now renowned for its modern high-rise apartment buildings, low-rise group dwellings and lush, green, manicured gardens and tree-lined streets.

Although medium and high-rise buildings have become the new norm in Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka, most other homes in Sri Lanka are low-rise and generally located in rural areas where farming, fruit and vegetable growing are prevalent.

Solar panels are particularly popular in Sri Lanka, as is timber-framed, block and rendered housing structures. Manual labour is more pronounced in this country

due largely to abundant supply and limited advances in technology. The contrast in housing styles is much more pronounced in Sri Lanka than Singapore, which has enjoyed a remarkable transformation in its economy over the last 40 years.

Both countries recognise the importance of tourism to their economies by constructing some impressive accommodation options in the form of hotels, resorts and farm-stays. Customer service is a highlight and carried out particularly well.

It is noticeable in Sri Lanka that many new homes are constructed in stages due to inadequate finance being available from the outset. This would have a big impact on builders in the housing industry in Australia.

Architects are used extensively in both Singapore and Sri Lanka to design new homes which, in Singapore, can't be sold for at least five years. Whatever the final design, shelter is always the imperative, especially for the homeless.

Most of us take a lot for granted living in Australia when it comes to our housing and standard of living. Little things like footpaths, street lighting and good roads are accepted as a fact of life. So too, is the quality of our homes, most of which are single or two-level on a reasonable-sized block of land. It's only when you travel or get exposed to how others live that you realise how lucky we are in Australia.

We should therefore never take for granted the quality of roofs over our heads, because some roofs overseas are held in place by a multitude of rocks – giving new meaning to the expression living “between a rock and a hard place”.

