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High-rise flats on takeaway menu

By **MARIKA DOBBIN**

Beach retreats

AUSTRALIANS are familiar with takeaway Chinese food, but buyers into a northern suburbs high-rise could be the first to get takeaway Chinese apartments.

Melbourne developer Jack Haber is planning a revolutionary Northcote project consisting of almost 100 ready-made apartments — complete with kitchen appliances, wardrobes and carpets — that may be shipped from a factory in China to be stacked together here.

So-called modular construction, where units are built and fitted out on a factory assembly line, was pioneered in Britain for budget hotels, university housing, kit homes and relocatable huts on work sites.

But prefabricated high-rise buildings have never been seen in Australia and there is a race to build the first, with developers keen to cash in on the Federal Government's housing affordability fund.

The Age has learnt of at least eight such projects in the planning stage in Melbourne, some in which the units would be made locally and others overseas, including several in partnership with State Government developer VicUrban.

It is estimated such projects will be up to 40 per cent quicker than conventional methods and cheaper by up to half, depending on whether the units are made locally or offshore.

One local company preparing to manufacture its first high-rise developments is Modscape in Melbourne's west. Joint owner Jan Gyrn said the company was already making low-rise housing in its Brooklyn factory. Last month, Modscape raised a pre-made penthouse, complete with furniture, on to the roof of a six-storey office building in East Melbourne.

"I think next year you will see a rush of multi-storey prefabricated apartments," Mr Gyrn said. "It'll be a line ball to see who's first."

Thirty-three applicants to

A DEVELOPER planning 200 beachfront homes where three houses have already been lost to the sea will make new owners truck their homes away if the water gets closer than 50 metres.

In what may be a model for beachfront developments in the global warming era, developer Olmwood has told Taree Council on the NSW mid-north coast it will make it a legal requirement for buyers to agree to take the houses away if forced to flee rising sea levels. It says the sites are safe for at least 100 years, a claim local residents say is exaggerated.

the Housing Affordability Fund have been assessed and are waiting to start government-funding negotiations. It is believed those projects will have to be completed next year.

"Modular construction is one of the only ways some of these projects will get delivered within the time frame," Mr Gyrn said. But he queried whether the public would back subsidising imported flats from China.

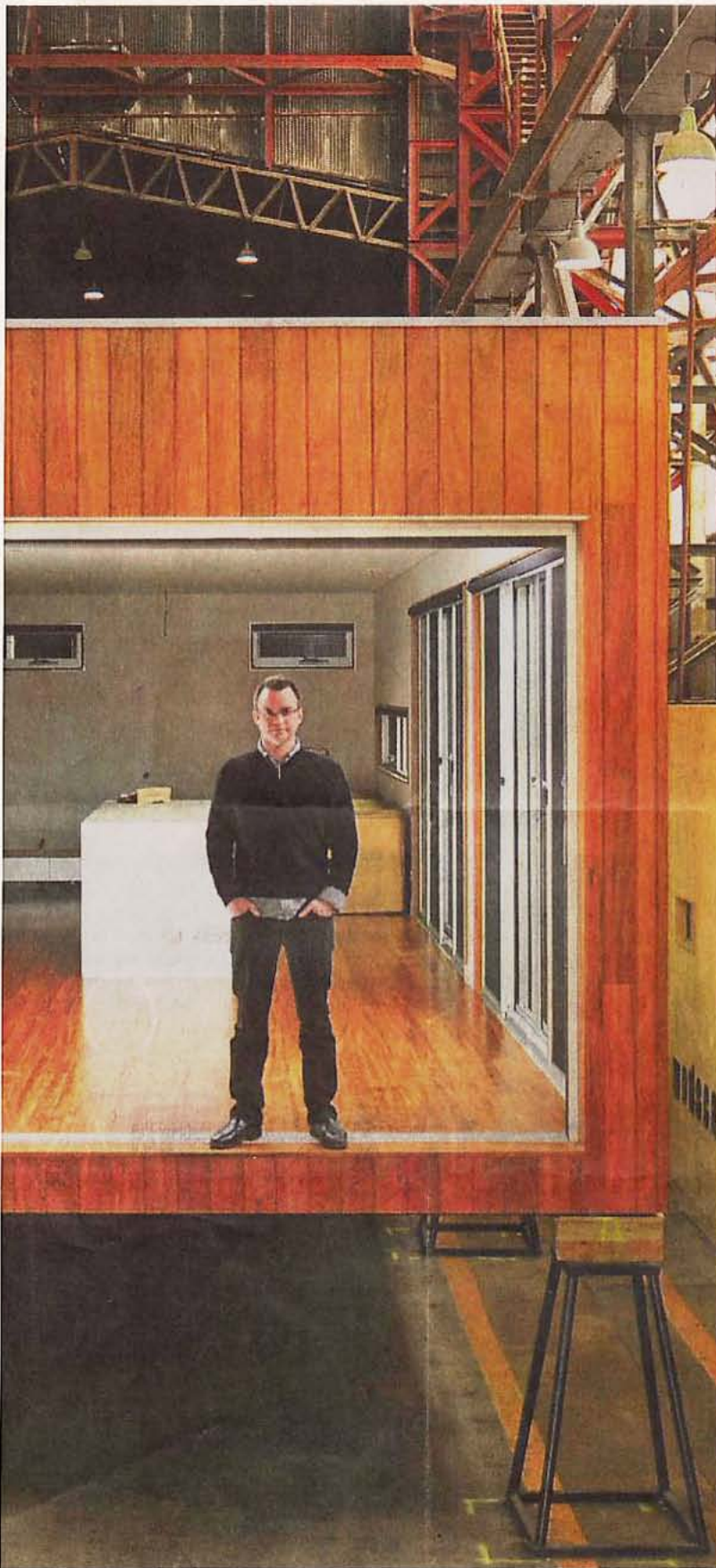
"I have an issue with taking all the labour and componentry offshore," he said. "And I'd question the integrity of the product, because I believe a container out of China is an inferior product to ours."

Mr Haber said his planned five-storey development overlooking Merri Creek would look no different on the outside than a conventional building.

"They're a full-welded steel box and when they're stacked become effectively a steel-framed building." The project would meet Australian standards and regulations, he said.

It is awaiting planning approval from Darebin Council, having received 90 objections.

Mr Haber said he was yet to decide on whether the units would be made locally or overseas but did not rule out China. Industry sources said China would be used.



side the company's factory.

PICTURE: JUSTIN McMANUS