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Working from home is changing apartment design

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Joe and Michelle Watson moved out of Sydney last year. The empty-nester couple have been renting, but are planning to buy an off-the-plan apartment in the NSW South Coast town of Kiama that they now call home.

They both work in sales and work from home. Joe is employed by an airconditioning company in an hour south in Nowra, but when not on the road spends most of his time working at home. And that has made them clear on what they need. It starts with three bedrooms.



Joe Watson, who is working from home with his wife Michelle, is looking to buy a three-bedroom apartment, so they both have space to work.

"We're after big living areas," Watson says. "With that extra-large bedroom for a master bedroom, a guest room and an office."

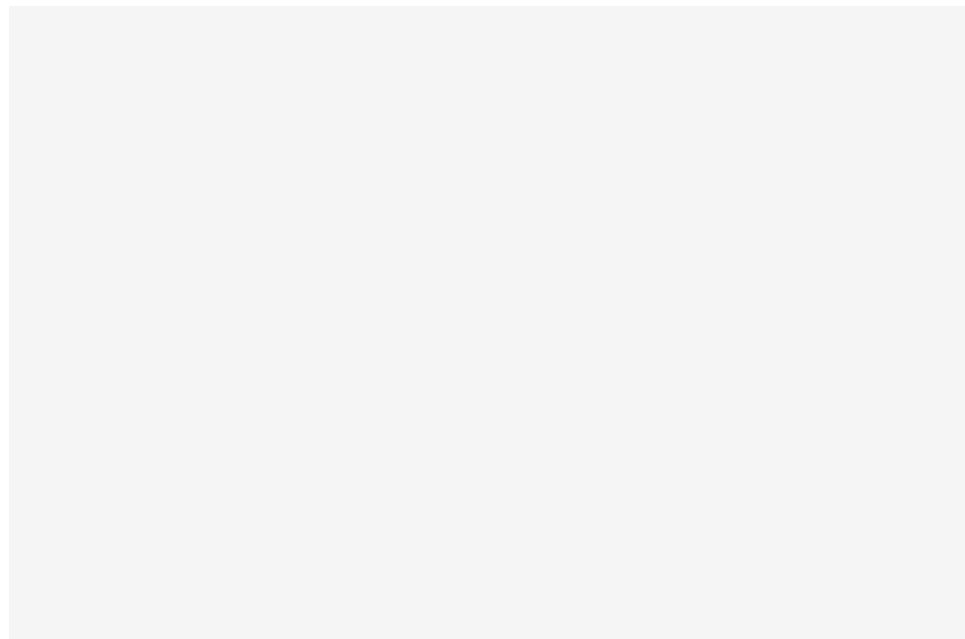
The [pandemic that has forced many people to work from home](#) is prompting a rethink about how people want that home to be. While the Watsons' move to work from home predates the pandemic, COVID-19 is forcing many others into a similar lifestyle – and prompting people to ask similar questions of developers.

It's not universal. In an August survey of builders, contractors and building product manufacturers by the Housing Industry Association 44 per cent of respondents – mostly smaller builders – said they had seen a change in demand, principally for study nooks or home office space. Customers were also asking for additional living areas.

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Nicholas El-Khoury says the Watsons weren't the type of buyer he was anticipating for Ridgewaters Kiama, a \$50-million project comprising 60 three-bedroom apartments.



Empty nesters such as Joe Watson and his wife Michelle were not the buyers Nicholas El-Khoury expected for

his three-bedroom unit project.

"For us it was a new type of interest from a new demographic," says El-Khoury, the managing director of St Trinity Property Group.

"That demographic is usually the large family. We've got interest from professional couples with no kids or older people whose children have left home, but they want the size."

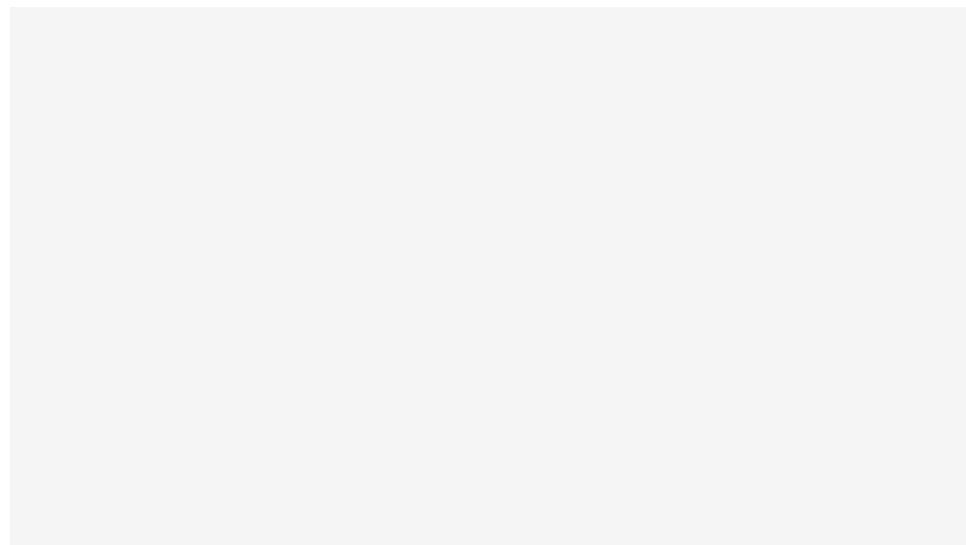
The bank-funded project has a presales target of 50 per cent of all the units. Construction is due to start in January, with completion a year later, by February 2022. Privately owned St Trinity, which provides project marketing services to other developers across greater Sydney, is seeing similar requests from buyers other than its own.

"We've had people say to us 'You've got some space between the laundry and the bedroom. Can you give me a study nook?'" El-Khoury says.

"You don't need one office space now, you need two. What we're seeing is two people working, they're fighting for the desk space."

That comes with a cost, of course. An extra 5sq m work area in a 70sq m unit is an extra 7 per cent in space terms. And in some cases, the design of a building doesn't allow changes to the plans to accommodate the wishes of buyers, El-Khoury says.

"We're not at liberty to muck around with internal walls as much as people think we can," he says.



Artist's render of the Ridgewaters Kiama project Joe and Michelle Watson will move into.

But in post-COVID-19 Sydney, a greater number of potential buyers are willing to make such a trade-off, El-Khoury says.

"We're definitely seeing a change. People are happy to go further out for bigger size

than being in a small apartment size."

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However, HIA chief economist Tim Reardon questions how long this push for more space in apartments will last. [The pandemic had prompted major decisions by households and changes in lifestyle](#), and reduced expenditure on travel and entertainment had given many households more money to spend on homes. But if the pandemic retreated, the changes may not stick, he said.

"What is not clear is, will these preferences remain as the impact of COVID settles over time?" Reardon says.

For now, at least, Watson says there is demand for homes better suited to working. A home office now has to be more than just a leftover cupboard. People want dedicated office space with good facilities for Wi-Fi and internet.

He sees the need for differently designed homes every day during the course of his work.

"I sell airconditioning to a lot of residences and I see a lot of people at home now," Watson says.

"I can see a lot of people stuck in these third bedrooms as an office."

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