

Melbourne firm builds prefabricated houses

ORTECH INDUSTRIES, a Melbourne-based building systems manufacturer, is taking a leading role in the reconstruction of East Timor with the introduction of prefabricated kit homes to the devastated territory.

Using a combination of Australian and East Timorese tradespeople, the company completed construction of the first house to be built in Dili since the September violence in less than four days.

The 36m² house is built using Ortech's own patented design panels manufactured from extruded wheat straw, with a water and fire resistant recycled paper box-board-like coating capable of withstanding pressures up to 8kPa.

At a cost of A\$6000, the house comprises three main rooms and a western-style



This prefabricated house was built by Ortech Industries in less than four days using a combination of Australian and East Timorese tradespeople.

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Ortech Industries managing director Derek Layfield ... the ease of construction of this type of building helps to quickly overcome housing shortages.

bathroom, tiled floors, a cement rendered exterior, running water, kitchenette and sliding aluminium windows fitted with insect-screens.

Ortech Industries managing director Derek Layfield said the prefabricated homes are well suited to overcoming the

shortage of habitable buildings in East Timor, as they are easily constructed and have a finish that is not dissimilar to what the East Timorese people are accustomed to. "We've used this style of building in a number of countries around the world to assist in reconstruction following a range of natural disasters. Their ease of construction allows housing shortages to be overcome quickly and cost effectively.

"The houses can be constructed using very simple hand and power tools by people with little previous construction experience.

"The combination of external cement rendering and extruded straw panelling provides the solid-wall look and feel the East Timorese are used to without the cost and time delays associated with solid brick construction," Layfield said.

The construction of the company's first prefabricated house in East Timor marked the beginning of a three-phase A\$4.5 to A\$ 5 million program the company has planned.

Phase two will see the company import additional houses for sale, as well as introduce ISO 9001 training courses for the East Timorese workforce it plans to recruit.

Layfield said he was hopeful of exporting some 150 houses of varying sizes and configurations over the next 12 months, before establishing a factory locally to manufacture the extruded panels in the third phase of the project.

With no wheat grown in East Timor the company plans to use rice straw purchased from local farmers, thereby giving the large rural community a secondary source of income and providing a viable

alternative to the environmentally damaging slash and burn technique currently used.

Layfield said the factory will be able to produce up to 4000 houses of varying sizes and configurations annually.

"Because the panels are modular they can be used to construct all manner of structures including schools, hospitals and commercial premises."

With an annual turnover of between A\$6 million and A\$8 million the 15-year-old company was established as a result of a management buy-out of the board and steel manufacturing divisions of Stramit Industries.

Layfield said the company's products are currently being used as part of the reconstruction in Turkey following the 1999 earthquakes, as well as in the Philippines following the devastation caused by cyclone Babs in 1998. ■