

Side projects

Building can be a tough game, so architects often jump at the chance to create other things, writes HARRIET ALEXANDER.

To hear architects talk about the painstaking process of bringing a design to fruition, you wonder why they persevere in a job that leaves them so dispirited.

Unimaginative clients, intransigent councils, ham-fisted planning laws and recalcitrant builders conspire to render the thrill of design utterly hollow – one blazing vision followed by months, sometimes years, of drudgery.

It is, of course, like all parenting, easier to pinpoint the complaints than dissect the rewards, even though the sweet ultimately overpowers the sour. But it is also why many architects find an alternative creative outlet, which eliminates that pesky committee of naysayers. Creating small things – from jewellery, to paintings, to fashion and furniture – is light relief from tackling big, complicated projects.

"[It's] a really lovely counterpoint – not to the misery of building because it has high points as well – but it's a really tough old industry," says Genevieve Lilley, who is foremost an architect but also designs jewellery for Venerari.

"You never feel so drained at the end of the day at the shop as you do at the end of a day arguing with builders."

Lilley's interest in jewellery grew from one dark-blue sapphire, a gift from her husband, who encouraged her to create her own piece.

"He comes from a family in which they



give each other a lot of jewellery," she says. "Architects are usually going on about how jewellery is useless adornment – and 'I don't need it' – and mostly it's because they can't afford it."

She designed an asymmetrical ring that she still wears and so began a hobby that turned into a business. "Building takes forever ... whereas jewellery is so quick," she says. "You meet the client and three weeks later the piece is delivered."

Erin Field's interest in craft pre-dated

her interest in architecture. She studied fine art before she was attracted to the more structured discipline of architecture, but maintained an interest in "making things". And it might have remained a personal hobby if it had not been that she played in the same netball team as Anna Plunkett, one of the designers behind the up-and-coming fashion label Romance Was Born, who asked her to collaborate on one of their collections.

That was four years ago and she has contributed to every collection since, with masks, headdresses and crocheted clothing. By day, she works as an architect with Durbach Block Jagers. "I think the crochet gives me a bit more bravery as an architect," Field says. "I'm willing to try some different things in architecture."

Peter Poulet – painter, architect and administrator – describes that process in his own work as a willingness to "incorporate accident and chance" into building design, adding, jokingly: "It's a personality flaw, actually."

Poulet is Tasmania's Government Architect but he continues to paint as he has done all his life, now more so than when he was a practising architect. Painting was an interest that his university professors actively encouraged because it gave him a different perspective on architecture.

Poulet's paintings, some of which will be exhibited at Maitland Regional Gallery from next Friday, are colourful and



Smaller scale ... (from left) Erin Field's crocheted necklace; architect Genevieve Lilley with some of her jewellery; a Peter Poulet artwork. Main photo: Domino Postiglione

abstract, which seems anomalous to the precision required for architecture. But he says his painter's sensibility seeps into his professional work.

"When I paint, I paint very intuitively and [apply] that adage, 'Let the painting take you where it's going and you're just the means to apply that,'" he says. "In architecture it is difficult to do that, but that ability to ... not predetermine every outcome is an interesting way of approaching creativity and I think architecture needs to do more of that."

What do the clients think of that approach? "They run screaming from the room." He laughs. "I think they enjoy it. It can be tedious and look, there's pragmatism in all this as well. There's budgets and time and you have to accommodate the Maserati in the garage."

Timothy Hill, of Donovan Hill, exemplifies an architect's inherent pragmatism with his side project in furniture. He is among a small stable of architects who collaborate in the venture Small Australian Projects, which makes furniture from designs that might otherwise be discarded and offers it to the public.

It is a venture steeped in thrift because it means the architects' intellectual property is not wasted.

"I guess like a lot of architects we always design more than we build," Hill says. "So furniture is one instance because there's a lot of situations in buildings where items are designed to complete the space but ... they're not required [because] they wanted to buy something from a shop instead or someone else takes over that part of the project or the tenant changes."

"It's trying to capture that pool and distribute it into another world."

Hill also likes the way that it means he works in collaboration with his usual competitors. They might design the house and his firm might supply the furniture.

"In a Frank Lloyd Wright house, every-thing is relentlessly similar, whereas



I think our diversity is of value ... It's actually got a collegiate charm," he says.

One architect who designs everything for a house is Alec Tzannes. He doesn't do it for every house and he might not do everything in a house but there are few items his firm is not willing to try – from shoe racks to doorknobs.

He has designed bespoke cabinets for fine-silver collections, with custom-fit cran-nies for each individual piece, wardrobes that require high-security measures, desks that transform into make-up tables and a succession of rugs for Aria restaurant.

"One person had a very significant tie collection, so we displayed those ties in a particular way," Tzannes says. "It's responding to a brief that couldn't be met by a standard product."

Architects have been designing items other than buildings for as long as the profession has existed. Frank Gehry designs jewellery for Tiffany. Zaha Hadid designs shoes for Melissa. And Michelangelo, who designed the dome of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, also carved out a modest statue named *David*.

But he refused to be called an architect.