software with byte

The most advanced version of SoftPlan has just been made available in Australia by Cadbuild. *Housing* takes a look.

SoftPlan has been helping builders, draftspeople and architects with their designs for 25 years. A leader in architectural software since it was first developed in 1985, the latest release, SoftPlan 2012 has raised the bar even higher.

SoftPlan 2012 comes with some new and inventive features that make the creation of drawings faster and more accurate. According to Cadbuild, its Australian distributor, the 2012 version will revolutionise what has traditionally been the difficult task of conveying design concepts to clients. Taking on board feedback of earlier versions from users, a concerted effort has been directed into raising SoftPlan's 3D performance to produce photo real images that can be printed or emailed for easy inspection, both inside and out.

New 2012 features offer higher quality symbols and materials, and by providing direct import of Google Sketchup files, access to thousands of additional 3D symbols can be achieved. Cadbuild has also developed much of the content specifically for the Australian market, including developing libraries in areas such as window coverings, appliances, roof tiles, posts and beams, even wheelie bins and clotheslines, to make it easier for clients to visualise the finished effect.

The program is already supplied with typical material sizes and construction materials. For example, some 60 walls are predefined – from brick veneer and interior walls, to retaining and block types. And users also have a large selection of additional textures, many coming directly from manufacturers including Boral, Monier and Colorbond.

The neighbourhood command is possibly the feature SoftPlan excels in. The command allows for the production of a streetscape of multiple buildings that can be positioned on a single lot, providing 3D images for town planning, which Cadbuild believes is particularly useful to Victorian designers.

Not only will it be possible to show clients enticing 3D presentations, but now designers will be able to work within the 3D model, drawing and modifying the design just as in a 2D floor plan. Multiple drawings and models can be viewed concurrently through an innovative navigation window offering a simple selection method and seamless switching between plan, elevation, cross section, top down, exterior orbit control and 3D views on a single window layout. In keeping with the latest screen style, ribbon menus are optional, along with a greater use of right mouse-button menus for fast selection of drawings tools.

Multiple drawings and models can be viewed concurrently through an innovative navigation window

SoftPlan architectural design software is made up of three main modules. The first, SoftPlan, allows for detailed drawing of plans. The second module called SoftView, takes the information from SoftPlan and generates the elevations, cross sections and 3D images required, and this module comes standard with every SoftPlan purchase. The optional third module, SoftList, also takes information from SoftPlan to generate a material list and estimates.

While the 2012 release has a fundamentally different look to its predecessors, its intuitive interface will help produce working construction documents with very little practice. The software comes with a comprehensive printed user guide, free technical support and no annual user fees, to get users up and running quickly. There is even a folder that provides additional lessons to get the most out of the program, on subjects such as how to input a site plan in 360-degree format, methods to produce shadow diagrams for council submission, and how to export material reports to external estimating programs.

For more information, a free demonstration DVD or to book an online demonstration call Cadbuild on 02 4657 1874, email sales@cadbuild.com.au or visit cadbuild.com.au H

a user's perspective

Dennis Cooke of Good Design Drafting in Carrum, Victoria, is one of the first people to receive SoftPlan 2012.

Now a draftsman, Dennis (pictured right) spent more than 36 years working as a builder, so he understands both sides of the design process. He first started using SoftPlan in 2003 because he wanted a 3D modelling program that offered 'a logical way of constructing a drawing'. Since updating to SoftPlan 2012 in January, Dennis says he is pleased with the new functions the program provides: 'They actually listened to their users, which is good. I've been very happy with it … What I like is that you can install it and just plug and play. You don't have to have countless lessons.'

He explains that when he opens existing drawings from the previous version, the files are automatically converted into SoftPlan 2012 without him making any adjustments. Dennis also appreciates that Cadbuild has done all the hard work with adapting the program to include Australian materials and suppliers, but he says that he likes the flexibility of being able to add new directories of his own – suppliers he uses or particular sizing for example – and it saves him time.

'You can create your own lists as well. You can create a new directory of window sizes from a company that you usually deal with … It is saved as a new window name and then it's there for you to use the next time. The same with walls; if you're dealing with a rendering company that uses thicker polystyrene to render than what you would normally draw, then you can create a wall to suit,' he says.

'What I like is that you can install it and just plug and play. You don't have to have countless lessons'

Dennis believes that SoftPlan really comes into its own when presenting to clients. He says that most people who aren't in the industry don't really understand plans, but with SoftPlan, clients get a better feel for their new space. 'Because it does really good colour perspectives, people can see exactly what they are getting. I invite clients to the office to have a look on the computer, and take them inside their kitchen [for example], so they are not just looking at line drawings. They get a real understanding.'

He says SoftPlan 2012 has been equally useful when dealing with town planning departments, where the feedback has been very positive. Because he has to draw at least three houses – at the side, behind and opposite the property he is designing for, SoftPlan allows him to show the whole neighbourhood in perspective so that the town planners can see exactly how the property will look in relation to surrounding houses.

Dennis says he would recommend SoftPlan to others in the building industry, believing it offers value for money, and with updates within a version automatically installed when you open the program, there is no need to worry. 'Compared to some drafting programs it is a lot cheaper to purchase and when you buy it, you own it outright. Plus you can have multiple keys for larger offices. You don't pay a yearly subscription to keep it going,' he says.