

1 Due Diligence

Whether building a new home, or renovating their existing home, many home owners have trouble knowing where to start. At times like this, advice from people who have been there and done it is vital. A good first step is to talk to others you know who have been through the process.

Ask these people questions like:

- What was their experience like?
- What did they learn during the process?
- Do they have any good consultants or contractors that they can refer you to?

When it comes to selecting a designer, make sure you do your research. The best way to work out if you have the right designer is to ask questions. Listen closely to their answers and get a feel for their knowledge, their motivation and the way they work. Different designers will work in different ways, and many have a different level of service, work out what you need most from your designer and go with someone who can provide it.

A good designer always puts the client's needs first, listens to you and has a genuine desire to ensure you have a good experience and receive a finished product you love.

Understanding the design process is crucially important. It can help you enjoy the journey and avoid stressful situations. If you are unsure of anything, ask your designer to explain. It is also a good idea to ask to see samples of their work. If you can see their sketch drawings, construction drawings and images of completed work, you will get a great idea of their capabilities. When it all comes down to it, use your intuition when you select your designer, the cheapest option is not often the best. You must be confident that whoever you select has the skills and knowledge to complete the work to a quality standard and provide service you are happy with.



2 Master Plan

Do you have a “big picture” for your home? If you plan on gradually improving your home over time, we strongly advise you to design a master plan before you begin work so you have a desired outcome to work towards.

Understandably people sometimes become focused on solving immediate problems rather than looking at the big picture. For example, if they need an extra bedroom, more living space, or an outdoor room they might press ahead with that and in turn, neglect other important areas. However, having a narrow focus on each step without consideration for the overall outcome and architectural integrity of the home usually ends up producing a disjointed design and a finished building that looks like a mishmash of different puzzle pieces.

Having a long term concept for your home can ensure that the finished project looks seamless and harmonious. It can also help you plan how your home will cope with your evolving needs. If you’re planning to start a family in the future, have family move in, or children leave home; then create a master plan that helps you meet your future needs. Of course, it can grow and evolve over time as more unexpected needs arise.

We suggest prioritising your master plan and breaking it down into stages. Your immediate concerns should be stage 1. Move on from there in terms of desire and necessity. Submitting all of your plans, or at least several stages, in one application will save you time and money. It also means that you get approval under current regulations. It is possible that future changes to regulations could impact your proposed work if you design your plan and get each stage approved separately. This can have detrimental effects to prior work that has been approved and built if you need to make alterations. However, if there are stages that you are unlikely to get to for several years the best solution is to approve that stage separately.



3 Personalised Design

It can be tempting to skimp on design in order to save money. Budgets can often be very tight, and the common thought process is that money is better spent on the construction, i.e. the stuff you can see!

However, when you're working to tight budgetary restraints, it is crucial to obtain good design advice. A sound designer will be able to help you work out the best solution to your design problem, whilst working within your budget and looking at ways to keep costs down during construction.

It is very important to analyse the way you and your family live and ensure that this is reflected in the design of your home or renovation. A designer that takes the time to get in touch with what you are looking to achieve, and how you intend to use your space now and in the future, as well as the inner workings of your day to day life at home, is best positioned to give you a personalised design that will fully meet your needs and desires.

Having your home personally designed for you and your lifestyle will potentially save you money in the long term. A well designed home, tailored to your specific needs, is far less likely to require renovating down the track.

As you live in a home you get to know its strengths and weaknesses. Over time, if the weaknesses outweigh the strengths you will either move or renovate to fix the problems. Either way, this costs you money. When the strengths outweigh the weaknesses, you have a home you love to live and spend time with family and friends in.



4 Site Specific Design

Every site is unique and has its own set of constraints that impact on the design of your home or renovation. Many housing developers and builders today have a standard range of plans that you can purchase and have built on your block of land. They may also offer a house and land package.

There are several potential problems when you use this method for your home:

- While you may find a design you like the look of, there has been no consideration by a qualified design professional as to how you, personally, will live in the home.
- These plans are generally designed for a flat block of land. They can often be modified to suit a sloping block but they generally end up looking like homes that have been adapted to suit something they were not designed for... a square peg for a round hole.
- You may find a plan that you just fall in love with that just doesn't fit on your block. Yet again when you look at modifying the design to suit your needs, you end up with the same result!
- Without proper consideration for how the house will sit on the block, the proportions are often askew, making the building look wrong.
- There is generally no consideration of solar orientation and the resulting thermal performance of the home.

There are many other potential problems I could list, but let's focus on the positives of having a design that works with your specific site. A design that takes in all the unique aspects of the site and provides considered solutions to any potential problems will look right; whether it's for a new home or a renovation.



5 Orientation

Not taking solar orientation into consideration during the design process is one of the biggest mistakes people can make. Have you ever lived in a home that was hot in summer and cold in winter? It is likely that the biggest reason for this was because the design was not orientated correctly. In situations like this people tend to reach for the air conditioning switch, which in turn increases the electricity usage and costs you more money. A building that is not orientated correctly is not only unpleasant to live in, it also is more expensive!

Living in the southern hemisphere, the ideal situation is to have the living areas of your home facing north. The extra light will make these spaces more enjoyable to live in and improve your thermal comfort levels, particularly in winter.

For protection from the sun during summer, we recommend you have a minimum 600mm of protection for your windows (ideal is 900mm). This can be roof overhang or an awning structure. This provides shade in the hotter months when the sun is higher in the sky, while allowing the sun to penetrate into the room in the cooler months when the sun is lower.

These days many homes are designed on increasingly small blocks. This, along with the concept of bigger is better, means that the homes are positioned on the minimum setbacks and often designed with no window protection to allow for increased floor area. While there is a place for a zero eave style, neglecting window protection dramatically impacts the thermal performance of the house.

Some tips for solar orientation:

- Living spaces should face north and have lower window sills to allow maximum penetration of sunlight in winter. All rooms should be as protected from the western afternoon sun as possible. Minimise any windows facing west.
- Where possible, avoid service areas including garages, storage rooms, laundry's, on the northern side as it will reduce access to sunlight for other rooms.
- Protect your windows with eave overhang or awnings.
- Insulation in your roof and walls will greatly improve thermal performance.



6 Scale and Proportion

Have you ever looked at a building and thought there was something not quite right about it? Maybe it was something obvious, maybe you couldn't put your finger on it. Chances are the scale and proportion of the building were not considered during the design process.

There are many elements to scale and proportion, from overall building bulk, height, roof pitch, the size of windows and any decorative features. Some buildings appear too tall or too top heavy, while others appear to be too lightweight in their roof structure. All of this is due to incorrect scale and proportion.

A designer with an understanding of scale and proportion will design your home or renovation with these principles in mind. This, along with consideration to all of the previous points will make your home stand out in your street.



7 The Extra Bits

There are many things to consider in the design and documentation process including initial site specific research with regards to regulations, dealing with consultants such as engineers & surveyors, lodging plans for the application process, getting the approval and even selecting the right builder for you.

Working with a designer who has a strong team behind them makes all of this a breeze, rather than the stressful maze it has the potential to become. Whether handled internally or through external consultants, a designer working closely with a team of quality people will provide a quality result. It's all about service really, and there are varying degrees of service levels provided by different designers.

The easiest path to obtaining your desired outcome with minimal stress is to choose someone who puts customer service and happy clients above all else.



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At Urban Design Solutions, our goal is to provide a holistic approach to design resulting in a building that is tailored uniquely to our clients needs, dreams and goals.

Our designs are driven by how you live, what you want, and what you need — now and in the future. Because we're not just designing 'a' house. We're designing 'your' house.

The end result is a beautiful design that's perfect for your home, perfect for your family, perfect for your life.

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