Before you begin

Being well prepared and thinking through all the issues up-front ensures the very best outcomes. Read this section before you begin.

The process

The process of buying, building and renovating a home has three stages.

Preliminary research

During the preliminary research stage, you begin to develop a ‘brief’ for your project. This communicates to your designer and/or builder exactly what you want.

There are many ways you can start: talk to friends who’ve built or renovated, browse housing magazines and websites, visit information centres, displays and open days. You can learn a lot by analysing the home you live in, noting what you like about it and what you’d like to change.

Your brief starts as a ‘wish list’ of features. Note which of these are not negotiable and which would be ideal if your budget allows. Ensure that your ‘not negotiable’ list includes basic sustainability features that save you money over the life of your home. Setting goals and targets, including for sustainability, goes hand in hand with the development of your brief and helps to guide the process. At this stage, plan your budget and research the costs of renovating and building. Seek professional advice as early as possible, by contacting an experienced designer or sustainability assessor. It may cost a little up-front but it’s a worthwhile investment.

The design process

Your working relationship with your designer is critical. Choosing the right designer for your project is arguably the most important step you’ll take on the path to creating your new home. Engage your designer based on experience, qualifications and track record in designing sustainable homes for your climate. Seek references from previous clients and, where possible, visit homes that the designer has completed.

Follow the tips on choosing a designer and other design consultants (e.g. sustainability assessors), and get an overview of the different stages in the design process and what to expect. You need to get fee proposals, and work with your designer to develop your brief and firm up your budget.

The construction process

Your choice of builder is almost as critical as your choice of designer. The principal role of a builder is to coordinate the building works as project manager. This role includes supervising and coordinating each trade; sourcing, quantifying and coordinating delivery of materials; and, most importantly, quality-assuring the entire process. The advice on choosing a builder, the tendering process and home building contracts is complemented by explanations of the different stages in the construction process and what to expect, including typical pitfalls to avoid.
Housing options
Choose the articles on the housing options that suit your situation.

Buying an existing house
What do you look for when comparing homes to buy, to ensure your new home is comfortable, cost effective to run and maintain, and holds its value into the future? This advice is designed to help minimise any future home improvement costs, or at least make you aware of the likely cost and effort of creating your sustainable dream home. Find out how to consider all relevant pre-purchase research, and shortlist and choose homes.

Buying a home off the plan
The step-by-step guide helps you choose a home from the range of designs offered by volume home builders, and make simple changes to adapt it to your climate, site and lifestyle. Volume housing typically costs less per square metre than a custom designed and built house. This can limit choice but industry leaders are adapting their formula to meet increasing consumer demand for improved environmental performance. You’ll find what to look for in a design and how to make small changes or upgrades that increase comfort, reduce the life cycle cost of your home and reduce its impact on the environment.

Buying and renovating an apartment
When buying an apartment, ensure it delivers good thermal comfort and low running costs. Because structural elements, common areas and services in apartments are usually owned and managed by a body corporate, options for sustainability alterations and additions by individual owners are often limited. However, progressive bodies corporate across Australia are undertaking innovative upgrades to reduce their environmental footprint. You can undertake upgrades within your own apartment, and possibly through the body corporate.

Planning home improvements; Renovations and additions
Read these two articles in conjunction for guidance on the process of planning and making home improvements to achieve your sustainable dream home. Analyse your existing home to build on its strengths and overcome any weaknesses, and create a ‘total concept’ plan that allows you to improve your home in affordable steps. There is detailed design advice specific to renovations and additions, as well as an overview of the typical design and construction process.
Repairs and maintenance

A good maintenance and repair regime is critical to extending the life and durability of a home. Read the tips on best-practice maintenance and on identifying hazards and risks in a home including hazardous materials, termite damage, dampness, cracks and settlement, and dealing with them.

Your site

Choosing a site

Where you buy or build your home has a profound influence over your ability to meet your existing and future needs. Living close to everything you need and to good public transport can significantly improve your quality of life, save on travel costs and reduce your environmental impact. In addition, the attributes of the particular site you choose can have a significant bearing on livability and comfort. What are the important factors to consider when choosing a location, and when choosing a specific block in your preferred location? The overview shows how to choose, design or alter a house plan to fit your block.

Challenging sites

A site could be considered challenging for a number of reasons: a steep slope, a difficult shape, exposed to unwanted climatic effects or subject to other constraining factors such as noise.

It may be preferable not to build on a challenging site because of the environmental impacts and additional costs that often result from site constraints. On the other hand, it is often possible to achieve good passive design and innovative solutions on such sites and take advantage of exciting opportunities for creating a sustainable home.

Author

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