

THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH ABOUT RENOVATING IN AUSTRALIA

The 7 Reasons Why Most Residential Extension Projects Fail To Meet The Home Owner's Expectations And The 1 Thing That Can Change That



ROB JOYCE

Introduction

As an architect, I get asked questions every day from friends and family who want to renovate their homes. Equally, they all ask similar questions such as what they can do, how much it's going to cost and how long does it take etc.? They equally all seem perplexed by my responses, particularly about the time frame it takes to get planning or design approval (DA) from the local councils. It seems as if there is a lot of misinformation out there in the market place giving home owners the wrong information about the building and construction industries. While renovating or extending your home is an incredibly rewarding endeavour it is not for everyone. The process is generally longer and costs more than what most home owners think. This article hones in on the seven main issues that home owners face before they call the designer.

1 Unrealistic Expectations

Sometimes disguised as dogged optimism, unrealistic expectations have destroyed many projects. With a plethora of renovation TV shows available today, home owners are being given the wrong message i.e. "You can renovate your bathroom in a weekend..." Popular Television shows all show building and construction projects being done very quickly and cheaply. This can be very deceptive as they quite often they don't include the labour costs in the estimates on the show, which can be as much as 60% of the overall costs. They definitely don't show all the hard work that goes on behind the scenes that is completed long before the show airs. This is the process of obtaining planning or development approval (DA), which is often referred to as getting a Planning or Building Permit. Nor do they show the time it takes to get one, which can take up to 12 months or so. The television shows illustrate very unrealistic timeframes for a project, which viewers believe to be real. The TV shows are a fantasy process that the real world can't match.

The best way to prevent unrealistic expectations is to be fully informed about what is required in the process of building and construction in Australia and what is involved before you call the designer or builder. With realistic expectations in place and understood by all the stakeholders (the home owners), your renovation / extension project has a much better chance at being successful.

2 Not Understanding the Building Process

When a home owner finally makes the decision to do a renovation, extension or addition to their home, they then look for a designer to get the plans and permits done. At this point the home owner is understandably excited about their renovation and want to get started straight away. However, most if not all home owners get frustrated with how long it takes to get the necessary paperwork completed so they can call the builder and start building. The process of obtaining the plans and permits can be quite long due to the nature of the process.

The building process in a nutshell can be broken down into 4 distinct stages.

1. Getting the designs done.
2. Getting the building approvals.
3. Looking for and appointing a good contractor / builder.
4. Building your project.

While this is a high level overview of the whole process, each stage can be broken down further in to more steps along the way. It is often said that building is the easy part. The hard part is getting all the designs and approvals done. From my experience this is true and this is where most clients get frustrated with the delays. So it is good to recognise from the start that this process is long and you need to have patience. Most of the hard work is done long before the builder turns up on site and starts to build.

The Inconvenient Truth about Renovating in Australia

As an extreme example, a new 40 store office building in the city (currently in construction 2020) was started with the initial concept designs back in 2008, more than 12 years ago. A building permit was issued in 2018, ten years after the initial concept design. The average house renovation project which takes 6 months to build usually spends around 8-12 months in the design and approval stages before a builder gets appointed.

Why does it take so long? Let me break the initial stage down further.

- **Appointing a designer.** After meeting with several designers (I recommend at least 3), select the one that you want to work with and engage them (this can take up to a month).
- **Concept Design:** Once you have appointed a designer you move into the sketch design / concept stage. This stage is the initial sketch design stage where you and your designer will sit down together and start to design your new home and produce informal sketches. The outcome of this stage is a design that you like. Depending on the complexity of your project and how busy your designer is, this can take between 1 and 3 months (average time), longer for more complex projects.
- **Design Development:** This stage is where the initial concept sketch design is taken further into a more detailed design with plans, elevations, sections and preliminary material selection. At this stage your designer prepares the documents (architectural drawings) to submit to the council for development approval (DA). Again, depending on the complexity of your project and how busy your designer is, this can take between 1 and 3 months (average time).
- **Development Application:** Once the client is happy with the overall design from the process above, the designer will submit the designs to the council for planning approval (DA).

The process of reviewing your designs usually takes about 3 months as a minimum. The average time it takes for a council to approve your designs is 100 days. Again this will depend on how busy your council is, how complex your project is and if there are any neighbourhood objections. If there are local objectors then this process can become significantly longer, as redesigning is usually required. Failing approval of the redesign, the last resort is to go to court for the approval (VCAT – Victoria). That process can add 12 to 18 months.

Why do we do this? Each state / territory and each local council all have town planning requirements that must be met for each building. This is a mandatory requirement. The only exception is if your proposed renovation / extension doesn't trigger any planning laws.

- **Construction Documentation:** After gaining a planning permit (DA) from your council, you can proceed into the construction documentation stage. The outcome of this stage is to obtain a Building Permit.

You cannot start building until you have a building permit.

To get a building permit your designer with the help from other external consultants such as structural engineers, geotechnical engineers, land surveyor, landscaper, interior designer's etc. need to create a set of construction documents (design drawings & specifications) to be issued to the building certifier (Building Surveyor) to review and approve. A building surveyor will only issue a building permit once they are satisfied that the documents meet the requirements of the Building Code of Australia and the current Australian standards.

The Inconvenient Truth about Renovating in Australia

These drawings and specifications are very detailed and construction specific and require more input from external consultants, hence they take a longer time to produce. Depending on the complexity of the design allow for 3 months as a minimum.

- **Tendering and Builder Selection:** The next stage is to appoint a good builder to build your project. This is a relatively simple process of selecting 4 or so builders to send your construction documents to (sending out to tender), so they can review and submit a price (quotation) to build your project. Once you have received all your quotations you need to review them with your designer and make a selection and appoint a builder to build your project.

I would allow 1 month for this process, remembering that you need to give the builder enough time (about 3 weeks) to review your drawings and write up a quotation. Allow 1 week for yourself and your designer to review and ask any further questions / clarifications from your builders.

- **Construction Stage:** Phew! It's been a long process to get here, but the builder has finally arrived on site and is building. The final stage is to monitor the building process and respond to any issues and problems along the way.

As you can see from the process above there is a lot of work that goes in to the project long before your builder arrives on site. This process is a necessary evil as you need to go through this process to get your design right, get all the required approvals and select a good builder.

3 Not Knowing What You Want

When a designer speaks to a client for the first time, he or she is usually trying to get the client to tell them exactly what they want to achieve from their project. Not all clients know this and need further guidance from the designer. Now that might sound strange initially, but clients usually tell the designer what they desire i.e. a second story extension with a new master bedroom. What the designer wants to know is what are you trying to achieve from your project? This information will assist your designer to ascertain how they can best help you. Many clients need to spend time with their designer working it all out before the designer can get started. This process can be referred to as creating a design brief. While this is exactly what a good designer does, this process can be time consuming and take a while to resolve.

This is where it is good to be prepared for the initial meeting with your designer. The best thing that you can do is to know what you want and be specific. Focus on what functional requirement you desire i.e. we have a growing family and we need 2 additional bedrooms, a separate living room etc. By knowing what you want you can minimise any possible time delays at the start and during the project.

It's great if the client has a vision board here...

Another thing to remember is that we are all human and sometimes we can be indecisive. This does happen more often than you think and while it is common to make changes it will ultimately cost more and take longer to resolve. Clients need to be aware that if they are indecisive and constantly make changes, this can delay the project significantly.

4 Not Having a Suitable Budget

Understanding building costs is a big issue to most clients. Most clients think that their entire budget will be spent on the building, but in fact only about 70% of their overall budget goes to the construction. Most clients don't realise that 10-15% of the overall budget will be spent on consultants such as the architects, engineers, land surveyors, soil reports, bushfire reports, energy compliance reports, building surveyors etc. They also forget about the taxes which is another 10% on top of the costs and that 10% can really add up. There are also other potential hidden costs can take up as much as a further 5-10% so you needs to have a contingency built in to your budget to cover for these eventualities.

These unforeseen costs can be due to latent (unknown) building conditions, hazardous substance removal (such as asbestos), building delays (such as Covid), weather delays, supplier delays or product changes. Lastly there are the client driven changes that change the scope of the project that cause additional costs to occur. All these additional cost are considered to be variations in addition to the original contract sum (. This is why many project go over their original budget and why it's so important for clients to understand the building process and the potential costs involved.

5 Not Understanding What the Professionals Do

As an architect, I find it funny that people constantly ask me 'What does an architect actually do? Naturally I assume that everyone knows, but that is certainly not the case. In fact it would seem that only a small majority of people actually know what 'We Architects' can do. Mostly people who have been architectural clients before.

The Inconvenient Truth about Renovating in Australia

Most people think that architects are just building designers, but that is about 10% of what we actually do. So here it is in a nutshell. Yes we design buildings, an architect is a building designer. However an architect is by definition:

“A person who designs buildings and in many cases also supervises their construction”.

Or, the definition that I like better...

“A person whose job is to design new buildings and make certain that they are built correctly”.

The last bit is the most important. **Make certain that they are built correctly.**

Expanding on that, the architect is the project manager / chief designer responsible for the overall building design and the supervision of the construction. What that means is that the architect takes the lead in the

- Architectural design
- Appointment and management of required consultants
- Overall design coordination of the construction documents.
- Tendering and negotiation process
- Appointment of the builder
- Managing and administering the building contract

To sum up the architect is a design professional and project manager by definition and someone who manages the project on behalf of their client from start to finish.

Similarly, other building professionals such as structural engineers, building surveyors, interior designers etc. are all construction professionals who provide expert advice and necessary input to the project. Understanding their role and their abilities is vitally important to the success of the project.

6 Trying to do Everything Yourself (DIY)

When it comes to home renovation or extension projects many home owners prefer to do the work themselves. While this can be a very rewarding endeavour, building your renovation yourself it is not always the best way. There is so much to organise, schedule and purchase during the project that you need to be a full time project manager just to keep on top of things. The process can be quite stressful for the uninitiated.

It is not always the cheapest option either as many projects can cost more than if it is done by a professional builder. The work often takes longer than you think or it never gets completed at all due to the owner either running out of money, time or both.

DIY projects tend to run on the owners time schedule in between their day job and hence they run over the normal timeframe normally allowed for a construction project. Not only do DIY projects tend to stretch the owners budgets and time, they also often due to a lack of time and money fail to meet the quality requirements that would be expected if the project was completed by a builder. DIYers sometimes settle for poorer quality finishes and unfinished work just to get it done because they become frustrated that things are taking too long or costing too much money.

Therefore I will state categorically that DIY is not for everyone. If you have any unfinished DIY project at home already, then I would seriously consider going down this path with a major renovation, addition or extension. For this I would always encourage to use the services of a professional builder.

7 Understanding How Changes Affects a Project

Change during a building project is inevitable. Changes / modifications to the designs and products can be made at all stages of a project from its inception all the way through to its completion. Understanding how changes effect a project is critical to its overall success. Large changes have a dramatic effect and are generally understood universally to critically affect a project, however what is often understated are the small changes. A few small changes here and there are easily manageable and don't really affect the projects budget or schedule, but a series of small changes throughout the project can really make an impact to the projects bottom line, quality control and schedules. This is referred to in the industry as 'Scope Creep' and it is often the result of the owners continuously making small changes. The key here is to minimise all changes unless they are really necessary.

There are three types of project changes:

1. Client driven changes.

A client driven change is where the client changes their mind and want to do something different such as change the specified materials, colours and textures or the design etc.

2. Design driven changes

A design driven change can be anything that relates to the initial design that has to change due to unforeseen circumstances i.e. the local council imposing certain conditions on your design under the planning permit such as relocating windows or changing their sizes etc.

3. Construction driven changes.

There are several types of construction changes other than the ones listed above. Latent or unknown building conditions can force a change to the project, unavailable products, product delays, design mistakes, council conditions changing etc.

The One Thing That Can Change That

***Fully understand what you are getting in to
And getting qualified professional advice.***

The best thing anyone can do before they renovate is to understand the construction process in Australia and understand what they will need to succeed. It is not as simple as many people believe. The process of getting the designs right and gaining approvals and permits can be long and exhausting and depending on the complexity of the project this process can take up to 12 months. Understanding of the timelines and the costs involved are crucial to the success of anyone's project, but when it is your project and your money it's even more important. Getting the right professional advice can assist you with making the right decisions.

Conclusion

If you are thinking of renovating or extending your home, I don't want this article to scare you as renovating is very rewarding and changes the way you live for the better. I have many clients who have successfully redesigned the functionality and the style of their homes to the benefit of their family and have dramatically increased the liveability and value of their homes.

Engaging an architect to guide you through this process and assist you at every turn is probably the best advice that I can give you. Now while that might sound self-serving, remember how difficult the process of renovating a home can become in point 2 above. Having a single point of contact and a professional on your side who can control the process from start to finish is invaluable.



NEW ONLINE DESIGN CONSULTANCY SERVICE

QUALIFIED AND INDEPENDENT DESIGN ADVICE

If you have downloaded this article and are thinking of renovating your home it is most likely that you have hundreds of questions. If you would like to have a no obligation and confidential discussion about your project, where you can get all your questions answered, then I would like to advise you that Spire architects offers a special online design consultancy service.

This is an opportunity to sit down with an architect and spend 90 minutes or so talking specifically about your project and asking anything that comes to mind. This is a completely independent service so there are no obligations what so ever, and one where we may even recommend that you don't need an architect.

The advice and recommendations you receive will be completely independent and objective. The Design Consultation process is about providing the right information to help you decide on the best course of action.

Would you like to discuss your ideas and proposed renovation project with our Principal Architect? It's easy follow the links to the sales page.