

23 TIPS FROM THE EXPERT FILES

Looking to make some improvements at home? See what our panel of professionals has to say before you get started

WORDS LYNNE TESTONI

When you are facing a renovation, it's fair to assume that you don't need to reinvent the wheel. There's so much information out there, and many experts who can advise, support and help you to make your dreams a reality, rather than trying to muddle along yourself.

Here, we've rounded up some of the smartest people in building and design, with specialties in renovation-based areas such as architecture, trades, kitchens, bathrooms, laundries and landscaping. Use their experience to your advantage and minimise mistakes before that first sod is turned.



PHOTOGRAPHY: DION ROBESON



ARCHITECTURE Suzanne Hunt

Perth architect Suzanne Hunt acknowledges that some people feel intimidated by architects, or think that they will be prohibitively expensive, but says neither is the case. And that well-designed houses are more comfortable to live in.

PLANNING "An architecturally designed home is going to be holistic," she says. "The architecture and interiors will be tied together. It will be a beautiful space that considers passive ventilation and the sun's angles. It will also be warm in winter and cool in summer. That is because we look at eave overhang, where the windows are placed, and the orientation. It should be environmentally sustainable and, if so, it's also going to be financially sustainable, because the less power you use, the cheaper it's going to be in the long term."

RESEARCH When looking for the right architect, Suzanne says it's important to do your research. "Look at a whole lot of architects' websites," she says. "And the reviews they've got. It's not always about the architecture, but the person. Do you think you feel comfortable with them and can talk to them?" She also says many people believe architects only do one type of house, but that a really good residential architect will do any type of architecture – the key is finding one who will listen to what you want and understand your needs.

BRIEF It all starts with your brief, Suzanne says. "I always ask people to tell me how they like to live. Do they like waking up in the morning and have sun hitting their face? Or do they like it to be dark and moody?" After this comes the functionality, she says, adding that architects are really clever at making even smaller spaces work more efficiently.

COST Suzanne acknowledges that architect-designed homes can be expensive, but says they result in a complete, finished home. She has seen clients swayed by builders' quotes that seem cheap, but essentially provide just a shell of a building. "An architect's fees will include the fixtures and fittings done to a high standard and will probably not be much higher than the original, lower quote that doesn't include the details."

suzannehuntarchitect.com.au

BUILDING Neil Hipwell

Award-winning builder and designer Neil Hipwell of Sydney-based Futureflip says the biggest issue facing the industry is that so many builders are overstretching themselves with their cashflow. “They’re basically taking on jobs they should never take on and letting other people down by overloading themselves.”

CHECK He advises that, before engaging a builder, you should check that they’re in a good financial situation. And while asking these sorts of questions can seem intrusive and tricky, he says it’s in your best interest to clarify the finances.

“I would suggest asking questions such as, how many jobs do you currently take on? How many projects are you going to take on this year? And what is your capacity? Are you running at capacity?”

COMPARE Neil suggests looking at comparable projects the builder has completed. “So, have they produced the products you want?” he asks. “If you want a luxury house, how many luxury houses has that builder completed successfully with happy clients?” Building work usually has a six-year warranty period, so Neil says it’s good to look at homes within a builder’s portfolio that have outlasted six years to make sure that everyone is still happy after that period.

COMMUNICATE The second part of the equation is to build a relationship with your builder during the design phase of the build. This helps to establish whether you mesh well with their communication style, and that they understand your project. Neil suggests engaging the builder as a consultant to do a design review before the building work starts. This might involve paying the builder by the hour to look at your plans and analysing where the architect or designer may have overdone some costs. “It’s a great way for you to understand how knowledgeable they are and how happy they are to work with you; you can get a feel for them and their way of working.”

futureflip.com.au



PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL BOYLE (THIS PAGE), LYNDEN FOSS (OPPOSITE)



KITCHENS Gavin Hepper

Award-winning kitchen designer Gavin Hepper of NSW's Concepts by Gavin Hepper says any good design has to start with understanding the space in your home and what you want to achieve with it.

ANALYSIS "Good design is also about identifying what doesn't function well and why you're actually renovating," he says.

"The question I ask most clients renovating their kitchen is, why? If they can firmly answer that, it gives them a good foundation for planning the new space." Gavin spends time at the beginning of the design process analysing the floor plan and the overall space, as well as understanding the kitchen's connection to the dining and living rooms, and any outdoor dining areas. "Spatial planning is a big consideration for me. I might ask if there is a possibility to borrow space from adjoining rooms that are perhaps underutilised."

FUNCTIONALITY Gavin says that a kitchen needs to be functional first of all – the dressing of the space and the aesthetics can easily be layered on top. "I would say, don't design for the Instagram photo. Design for you and your family and choose materials that are going to hold up to the wear and tear of life. We call them materials that are fit for purpose. They need to work hard, especially if it's your forever home and you're expecting the kitchen to perform for 10, 20 or even 30 years."

DETAILS Many people overlook the details, says Gavin, mentioning the importance of



a good bin and its connection to the sink and dishwasher. "Good lighting may also be dismissed in the early stages [of design], but having a solid lighting plan is actually imperative to a good kitchen, as is a good rangehood," he adds. "There's nothing worse than having odours hanging around your kitchen, but a lot of people dismiss that."

RECOMMENDATION A final tip from the designer? A pull-out mixer tap for the kitchen sink, says Gavin. "Every client that has one says to me, I want to thank you for that advice. That was one of the best things we added." conceptsbygavinhepper.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: LIGHT & LINES (MAIN IMAGE)



SUSTAINABILITY Sarah Aubrey

Accidental sustainability expert Sarah Aubrey of Electrify This learned all about creating an efficient thermal envelope the hard way – by reworking elements of her 115-year-old cottage in Sydney to save money and reduce energy usage.

Originally planning a larger renovation, she was inspired by a podcast talking about 'practicing enoughness', where an architect talked about assessing what you need versus what you want.

PRIORITISE "We'd considered knocking walls down, going up a level, and doing all sorts of things," Sarah explains. "And we just thought, what do we really need? The house is freezing cold in winter, and we are using over 42 kilowatt hours a day in energy. We needed to fix that. And rather than putting ourselves in debt and getting things we didn't really need, I decided to put some of the money set aside into the house instead and spend much less."

ASSESS Sarah and her wife, Rebecca, hired a residential efficiency scorecard assessor, who scored the house 2.9 stars out of 10. They hired a thermal camera from a local library (for free) and checked where cold air was coming in. "There were things I had no idea about, such as a giant gap at the back of our kitchen door frame. Another surprise was our chimneys. All our lovely warm air was going up through the chimney into the roof."

CHANGES Sarah made lots of changes to improve the thermal envelope. "The biggest thing we did was getting off gas because our bill was more than \$1000 a year. We removed our gas stove and our instantaneous gas hot water, and put in a hot water heat pump." Sarah also removed the existing gas heater and replaced an ageing ducted air conditioner with four energy-efficient reverse-cycle wall splits, as well as installing underfloor insulation and topping up the roof insulation.

Now a leader in the sustainability space (and using just 12 kilowatt hours a day from the grid), Sarah inspires others through her Instagram and TikTok pages. [@electrify_this](https://www.instagram.com/electrify_this)



BATHROOMS Renee Enoka

Interior designer Renee Enoka of ABI Interiors says that, before you start on a bathroom renovation, you need to understand your budget and timeline.

BUDGET “First and foremost, establish a clear budget to guide your choices,” she says. “This should include an extra 10 to 15 per cent for unexpected expenses that may arise during the renovation process. Next, evaluate the space and decide on your design and layout, ensuring they tick all your boxes in terms of functionality, practicality and aesthetics.” Key considerations should include storage solutions, proper ventilation, effective lighting, and whether or not your plumbing and electrical systems need to be upgraded.

TIMELINE “Set a realistic timeline that considers the availability of labour and materials, and other potential delays,” says Renee. This will help to ensure your project stays on track and that the entire process runs smoothly.”

MOODBOARD Renee recommends creating a moodboard, so you can see how different elements – colours, textures, fixtures and materials – will work together in your bathroom.

SAVINGS When it comes to navigating the balance between splurging and saving, Renee says that bathrooms can be tricky. “The balance varies for everyone, based on lifestyle and space requirements. Start by considering how you intend to use your bathroom and identify your top two desires for the space, such as a luxurious bath for relaxation or a specific style of tapware. Splurge on the must-haves and explore cost-effective alternatives for the rest.”

LONGEVITY “Another critical point to remember is longevity. Investing in oversized or difficult-to-install items, such as baths, tiles and tapware, is always wise, as higher quality ensures durability and saves money on replacements in the long run. For smaller items, such as doorknobs, towel hooks or other accessories, affordable alternatives can easily match your style and will be less of a concern if they need to be replaced later on.”

abiinteriors.com.au



DESIGN: COMMA PROJECTS (THIS PAGE); PHOTOGRAPHY: ABI INTERIORS (THIS PAGE); GRACE PICOT (OPPOSITE); STYLING: KARA DEMMRICH (OPPOSITE)



LAUNDRIES Kara Demmrich

Serial renovator and former *Block* contestant Kara Demmrich (of Kyal and Kara fame) says that laundries are having their moment in the sun as a well-designed and beautiful part of the house.

“Historically, people just thought it’s that room where you’d close the door and hide everything,” she explains. “But now people are really understanding that you spend a lot of time in there and, if you plan the space right and have the foresight, you can create a great multifunctional space.”

LAYOUT The first priority when designing the perfect laundry, Kara says, is always the layout. “Not just the layout internally, but where it’s situated within the house,” she says. “In a build we’ve done recently, we were able to situate the laundry where we wanted so we had external access.

This means you can either create a mud room, or just have access to the clothesline, which is obviously very handy as a family. Internally, the layout is just about making the most of the space you have. We’ve done a couple that aren’t huge spaces at all, but we used the spaces correctly and were able to fit so much in.”

DESIGN That’s where smart design solutions really do come in, says Kara, such as making the most of vertical space with overhead cabinetry or hanging space, and making sure you have a nice mix of storage. “I’m a huge fan of pull-out baskets because nine times out of 10, a laundry doesn’t have a lot of circulation space. I don’t want my laundry basket taking up that walkway, and so pull-out baskets are a great solution.”

kyalandkara.com

LANDSCAPING Adam Robinson

When looking at creating residential outdoor areas, landscape designer Adam Robinson of Sydney's Adam Robinson Design says it's important to start with the architecture of the house, whether that's proposed or existing, so the landscaping will complement the building.


CONNECTION "I believe that the landscape designer's role is to expand and draw from the existing surroundings," says Adam. That all-important connection

between inside and out is also a priority for the designer, who always considers the existing internal flooring when planning the outdoor spaces.

"If it's a blond timber inside, you might go for a creamy limestone or a natural stone outside. Or if it's a black floorboard inside, then you might go for more of a darker colour outside or even a grey, so it feels a little bit cooler," he explains. "I don't think those two need to match – they just need to have a relationship." And it's not just the flooring that Adam considers. "I ask

clients which metallics they have, in tapware or handles, or even curtain rods. It's good to form a connection. That might be with the lighting, the pots, or even the furniture."

USABILITY Another key to good design, says Adam, is usability, so, before creating the space, he spends time with clients learning how they like to entertain and use their garden. "I ask if they prefer a large dining table or a large lounging area. Generally, if there are kids around, people entertain and use their space very casually – lounges

can be better for that. In that case, you can still eat a sausage or a salad on your lap if need be. Otherwise, some people really prefer to be outside, reading the paper and having breakfast and sitting at a dining table. If there's only room for one area, we generally go for dining furniture with a comfortable chair – a design that the owner will be happy to sit in for four hours."  adamrobinsondesign.com



PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIGID ARNOTT, AIMEE CROUCH (PORTRAIT)