



IN TWO MINDS

Architect or building designer ... which one is right to turn your dream house concept into reality?

Knowing where to begin can be the toughest part in renovating. An architect might do a whizz-bang job, but are they going to blow your budget? A building designer seems a popular choice, but will you get the results you're after? And once you decide on that, how do you find a good one? These are just some of the questions homeowners face when they are looking to renovate.

Housing Industry of Australia NSW executive director Graham Wolfe says homeowners facing the ruinously high costs associated with upgrading to a new house are increasingly deciding to stay put and improve what they already have.

In the December quarter alone, Australians spent almost \$1 billion on renovations.

"People are working out what they want and what they can afford to improve their homes," Graham says.

When it comes to choosing an architect or building designer, there are a few things to consider.

Pinpointing the differences

Graham says architects are university-trained designers who have studied the process of design in more complex detail than building designers. In contrast, he says building designers would consider themselves more practically minded and geared to deal with on-the-ground designs for residential clients.

"But that is not to say that building designers aren't equipped to do the more complicated design work," he adds.

Graham says an architect and a building designer are both qualified to design a home and to do renovations, alterations and additions. They each incorporate such things as streetscapes, aesthetics, efficient use of land, environmentally responsible design and the use of various materials and colours.

"Some people might expect an architect to create innovative designs to match their personality and show a lot more flair and sophistication," Graham says. "A building designer might take the client's ideas and put them on a set of plans, but that's not to say the roles aren't reversed in some instances."

For some people, Graham says the decision can come down to the extra status perceived in hiring an architect.

Builder Mark Merhi says a building designer sits somewhere between an architect and a draughtsman.

"They are less qualified, but for standard homes they are quite adequate," Mark says. "The more complex you want it to be, the more you need an architect."

The downside of a building designer is that they won't always supervise the construction of your house, whereas an architect usually manages the project.

"An architect stays on the job from start to finish and that gives you the greatest chance it will run smoothly and nine times out of 10 you will get what you were after," Mark says.

Architects also do all the paperwork and liaise →

TAKING THE HARD ROAD

Managing a renovation project yourself may save dollars but the time and energy required will not suit everyone. A pragmatic assessment upfront is a good place to start.

Working in stages

When Heidi Lambert and her family bought their Concord home, they knew they had a big job on their hands to turn it into a house they wanted to live in. Most of the house was gutted and has since been modernised.

Heidi (above) hired the tradesmen herself but, in hindsight, says it would have been a lot

easier to have had a professional architect or building designer to oversee the project.

"At the end of the project, I thought I would rather have hired someone ... perhaps I had been a little naive," Heidi says.

But living in a rented house in Concord during most of the renovations meant Heidi could keep a close eye on the work being done.

"If I had lived on the other side of town it may have been worth hiring someone," she says.

Heidi, mum to Cecelia, 3, and Mack, 5, says she and her husband are truly over renovating and have done the project in stages, partly for financial reasons but also to give them a break.

"We still have a front veranda and another bathroom to do, and a garage I'm going to convert into a rumpus room," Heidi says.



A Television renovation expert Chris Gray uses an architect when he needs to make structural changes
B An architect or a building designer should be able to take on board all your requirements and present you with a "virtual tour" of your new house

BEGIN BY WEIGHING UP THE COST FACTOR

Renovating a house is a nice idea but figuring out how much it will cost can be tricky. Follow this 2008 Archicentre guide to determine how far you can go in transforming your place into a dream home.

GROUND LEVEL EXTENSIONS

Weatherboard	\$850-\$1590 per sq m
Brick veneer	\$950-\$1630 per sq m
Solid brick	\$1030-\$1920 per sq m

UPPER LEVEL EXTENSIONS

Weatherboard	\$1100-\$1660
Brick veneer	\$1250-\$2120
Solid brick	\$1410-\$2400

RENOVATIONS

Bedroom	\$3900-\$8100
Laundry	\$4000-\$9500
Bathroom	\$9200-\$24,000
Kitchen	\$10,200-\$30,500



with the right people to facilitate the process. In Mark's experience, a building designer may lodge council plans for you or simply provide you with a presentation pack to lodge with council yourself. "You give an architect a lump of money and have them handle it all for you," Mark says.

Show me the money

Traditionally architecture fees are 10-12 per cent of a project's cost. Fees can vary depending on the type and complexity of the project. According to Archicentre, the fee may be worked out as a percentage of the building cost, on an hourly basis, or simply as an agreed fixed sum. Building Designers Association NSW director Ian Bassett says there is a general feeling that architects are more expensive.

"For the general homeowner, most just can't afford an architect. It's as simple as that," he says. Ian says there is also a perception you don't get what you want with an architect, that it's more about the architect's ideas. "Architects would say they have more of an appreciation of design but that's an iffy one. There are good and bad architects and there are good and bad building designers. "Design to me is inherent within the person rather than being trained in." Ian explains that a lot of building designers do have architectural qualifications but don't become registered architects simply because they don't see the need.

But architects are quick to point out that they don't always charge more than building designers anymore. "There is quite a bit of misunderstanding over fees, because building designers can cost just as much," Archicentre state manager Angus Kell says. Angus says the real benefit of hiring an architect is the full service they provide and the fact they see the job through from start to finish.

"It's when things start to unravel and get difficult that you rely on the additional services of an architect, whether they be problems with your builder or local council," he says. Angus equates renovating a home to buying a property. "You can use a conveyancer but if something goes wrong, you'd wished you'd hired a solicitor." Channel 9's MyHome expert Chris Gray renovates about 50 properties a year and when he needs to, he hires architects to make structural changes. "A lot of people try to take shortcuts, but you have to spend the money to make the money," he says.

"Not all architects are going to be good, but you need to assess the difference they can make." If they can add 5-10 per cent to a property's post-renovation value, for example, spending money on their fees is worth it. "The people who are tight with money are the people who will make mistakes," Chris says. Finding the right architect or building designer is crucial, so Chris advises getting recommendations from people who use architects regularly.

Builders will quite often come with their own architects, for example, and mortgage brokers or real estate agents may also be able to help. He recommends going through Archicentre, which matches architects with clients. Then you will have a fallback if something goes wrong. Archicentre offers a pre-paid service from \$910 for alterations without extensions to \$2310 for a new house. The fee includes a design report comprised of a written confirmation of the objective, schematic plans and an opinion of what the job is likely to cost. Angus says this service allows people to be fully informed before they decide to move forward.

Shared vision essential

Regardless of who you choose to transform your house, HIA's Graham Wolfe says people should seek someone they can communicate well with. Graham says a competent professional should be able to transform your ideas into visuals on paper and then into design plans a builder can follow. "A bedroom on a plan is four lines but they should be able to make you feel like you are walking through the room and taking a virtual reality trip through the house while you are sitting in their office," he says. "If they can't do that, you are taking a stab in the dark that what they've drawn on the plan is what you want." Graham suggests explaining to an architect or building designer your financial limitations and if your renovation is to emphasise factors such as sustainability, child safety, entertainment or lifestyle. "Ask them to come back to you with their ideas. You need to establish a rapport, because you are trusting them with your vision," he says. ■

JOANNA TOVIA

POPULAR CHOICE

✓ Up to 75 per cent of residential renovations are done by building designers rather than architects