

# SURVIVING a renovation

Renovation nightmare stories make for interesting conversation, but if you prefer to sleep well at night, be sure to do your homework before you even start



WORDS Luisa Volpato

Every day, homeowners around Australia contact Archicentre — the building advisory service of The Australian Institute of Architects — for advice about their renovation projects. Unfortunately for some, the advice comes too late. To avoid the three most common renovation problems — cost blowouts, delays and faulty work — it pays to be prepared and to seek expert advice.

“It might sound obvious, but it’s important to sort out your budget from the very start,” says David Hallett, architect and general manager of Archicentre. “Get a feasibility study done so you know what it is likely to look like and likely to cost. If you don’t, you can get too

far down the track and you start spending money on drawings and permits and then find out it’s going to cost twice as much. That’s not the time to find that out.”

Archicentre offers a fixed-fee design concept to help homeowners decide if it is, in fact, worth renovating their homes. “The design concept helps determine if renovating is the right solution and, if it is, the best way to go about it,” says David. “It includes concept drawings and plans, recommendations on materials and finishes and an itemised opinion of probable cost. It’s a good way to get input from an architect early on without any obligation to carry out the project.”

When briefing your architect or design professional it’s also important to consider your master plan, says David. “Inevitably for

most people, their wish list is bigger than their budget, but if you break it down into priorities, you can complete the renovation over time,” he said. “So you don’t end up over-committing yourself but you do end up with the dream home you want that also accommodates your future needs.”

Once you get through the budget and design stage, the next all-important step is choosing a builder. “Each state has different requirements for builders’ registration and insurance, so find out what the licensing requirements are in your state,” says David, and “make sure you have a written contract in place and that it’s a standard industry contract, not just something pulled together.”

The contract should include a “liquidated damages” clause, which is a provision that

entitles people who have moved out of their home while renovating to claim the cost of that rent back for the period of time the project is delayed.

“Of course, the delay has to be unreasonable or unaccountable,” says David. “If it rains for two weeks, that’s not the builder’s fault, but if it runs late without a good reason, you are entitled to the agreed claim.”

While homeowner Matthew Perez had a contract in place, the simple oversight of not including a project completion date meant he and his family ended up at the mercy of their builder when their renovation blew out from six to nine months.

“Building started to really slow down for no reason, yet the builder was demanding progress payments, so you can imagine there was a bit of a standoff between us,” says Matthew. “I found you really need to link payment with project milestones in the schedule of works and, ideally, pay a big enough deposit to convince them to finish on time.”

“And for much of the time I felt like the builder was just the middleman between me and the subcontractors, without actually taking responsibility for their work. I was surprised and annoyed by how much time I ended up on the job briefing them and double-checking their work.”

Before & After Images are of Amanda Falconer's renovation, see page 28



Inevitably for most people, their wish list is bigger than their budget, but if you break it down into priorities, you can complete the renovation over time.





## Top 10 renovating tips

Archicentre's top 10 tips for a successful and cost-effective renovation:

- 1 The design concept must be first class.
- 2 Working drawings must be detailed and accurate.
- 3 Don't use expensive fittings and fixtures.
- 4 Make sure your builder and subcontractors don't substitute materials.
- 5 Choose the most economical construction method and materials for the job.
- 6 Room sizes must be efficient.
- 7 "Architect designed" can add 10 per cent to the value.
- 8 Get a minimum of three prices for all work.
- 9 Your contract should have a "liquidated damages" clause in it.
- 10 Aim to add value — not cost.

For more info: [www.archicentre.com.au](http://www.archicentre.com.au)

Despite some hiccups along the way, Amanda Falconer's bathroom enjoys a light and spacious result



after

"I definitely recommend also having an independent person check on the project along the way. I contracted my architect to walk through the site every two weeks — it was good peace of mind for me," says Matthew.

Getting the right price is the other key objective on any project, says David Hallett. "When it comes to builders, subcontractors and materials, get more than one price. Ideally, get three quotes, then you can be pretty confident of what is a fair price," he says. "But you'll only get accurate and reliable prices if you provide comprehensive

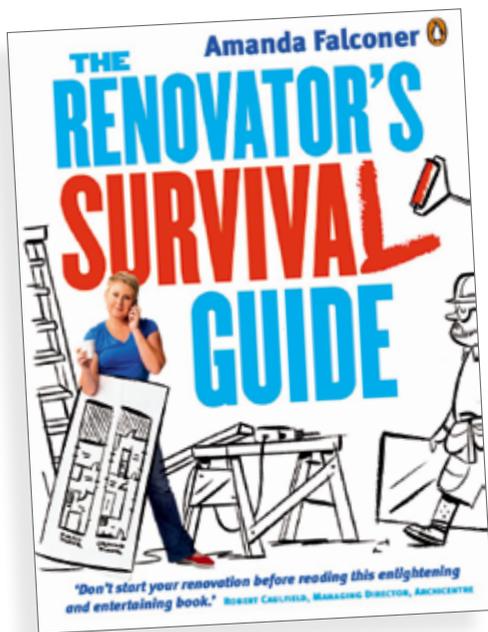
drawings, not just some basic layout drawings. That way, it will be clear what you want, what's to be included and what's not."

When it comes to what is included and what's not, David's advice is to always look at how you can add value — not cost — to a renovation. "You want to add light, space, views, good orientation, the 'wow' factor — that type of thing," he says. "You don't just want to add expensive light fittings and high-end appliances. Ultimately, you want a well-designed and well-built home, not a badly designed and poorly built home with lots of expensive fittings and finishes in it."



before

“One thing I learnt is the enormous knowledge and skill a good builder has. There are enough regulations to fill a phone book.”



### renovator's words of wisdom

Amanda Falconer calls herself a renovation survivor. After her renovation turned into an “epic disaster” she fired and sued her builder, finished the job herself and wrote a book — *The Renovator's Survival Guide* — so others could learn from her experience.

“I think I was like a lot of people in that I knew I was about to do a biggish renovation but I really didn't think it would be that much of a big deal,” says Amanda. “After all, I wasn't actually going to build anything myself. I was hiring a bunch of professionals to do it! But I made a major mistake in not choosing my builder well enough and not having an independent expert check the works.

“My three-month \$180,000 renovation ended up taking two years and \$250,000 to complete. After I engaged a building

consultant, he told me I'd not only overpaid but much of the work was defective. I then spent months terminating the contract and finding other trades to finish the job. And let's not mention the court case!

“One thing I learnt is the enormous knowledge and skill a good builder has. There are enough regulations to fill a phone book or two, let alone guidelines on the “quality” way to do things. Ideally, get a building consultant to assess the works at key stages and tell your builder upfront that the work will be checked at each stage,” says Amanda.

“The three key building quality problems to look out for are structural issues, water ingress and poor finishing. The most common of these is water ingress — often because of waterproofing failure in wet areas and

balconies. If it doesn't look right, ask — it's better to find out now, when it's easy to fix something, than to wait until it's finished and expensive to fix.

“Because the serious problems are things that have been done badly ‘under the hood of the building’ it's really important to research your builder thoroughly,” explains Amanda. “When you go around and see past clients, choose someone whose renovation was done a year or two ago and find out whether they had any serious problems and, if so, how they were dealt with. And remember: a good builder isn't the only thing you need, but it sure makes life easier!”

Photos courtesy of *The Sunday Telegraph*, *Your Space*.  
Photographer Anthony Reginato