

13 Buying to alter

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The Australian dream of building a house on a new suburban block of land is becoming more costly and less convenient as our cities grow bigger. More people are turning to buying closer in and altering. We are now creating hybrid houses, built 1920, rebuilt 1986. Done well it's a good way of housing ourselves.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO ALTER IT?

There are a number of reasons why you might look at a house with the intention of buying and altering it.

- You might really want to live in a locality that is handy to shops, transport, entertainment, work, schools, beaches or the bush, and the only houses available are 50 or more years out of date and the kitchens, bathrooms and style don't come up to scratch.
- You might only be able to afford to buy a smaller or lower cost house, but hope to improve or expand it later when you have more money, or with your own time and labour.
- You may have fallen in love with a style of architecture of yesteryear, but are unwilling to live with the standards of amenities of the Victorians or turn-of-the-century Australians.
- You might want to live around neighbours who have your cultural preferences and lifestyle, and the only housing available near them needs upgrading.
- You might have lived in the house for a while, and increases in family size, or improvement in financial circumstances, may result in you considering alteration rather than moving to a new house.

Whatever your own reasons, it helps to be clear about your motives.

You certainly don't want to be in the position of having bought a house with no intention of altering it and find you need to, because you didn't check it out properly to begin with.

Re-read Chapter 12, 'Buying Housing' before you even consider buying to alter. The steps involved in that chapter apply equally to buying with the purpose of altering, except there are some additional things to consider.

Pay particular attention to preparing your own check list and inspecting the property. This chapter will add to both, but they are your starting points.

CHECKING OUT SPACE AND GEOMETRY

This is not the title of a chapter on space travel, although the experiences of some-people as newcomers to the realm of 'home alterations' may persuade them that they've arrived in a different world.

It is really about finding out whether the addition you want on the house you're considering buying, or are now living in, will fit.

There are a number of basic directions you can take in adding space to a house. They are:

- 1 Sideways or backwards
- 2 Up or down
- 3 Inside by combining two rooms to make one.

Often, in a big alteration, all three methods will be used.

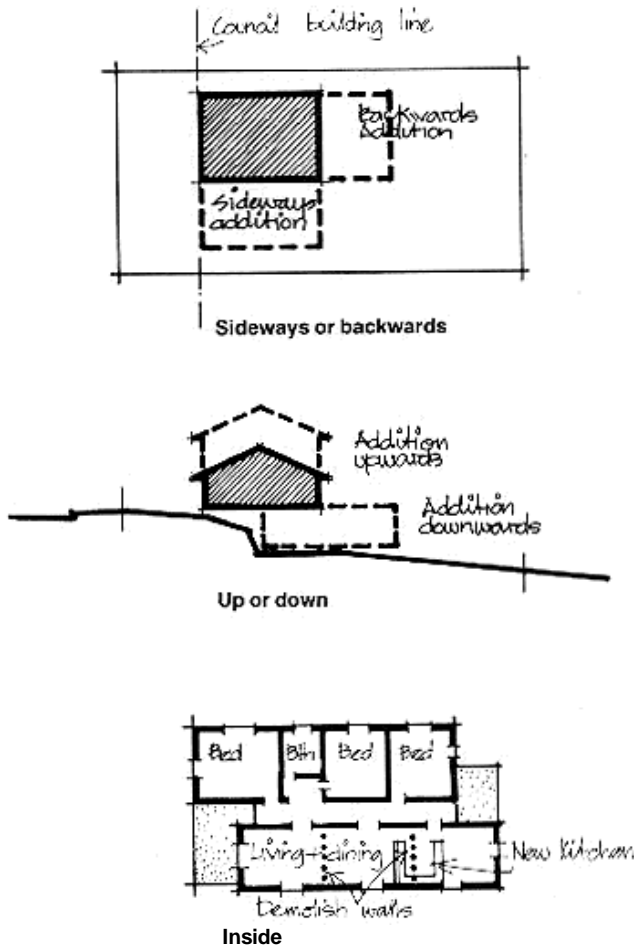
Whether you're buying, or altering your own house you need to check whether there is the space to accommodate the new rooms.

- First decide how big these new rooms need to be.
- Second, with a tape, measure each room in the house, and the distances from the house to the side and rear boundaries.
- Third, sketch the house plan on graph paper using one centimeter equals one metre.
- Fourth, draw where you want the new rooms, taking account of all the things you've learnt in Chapters 3 and 10. It's not quite so simple if you want to go up or down.

Going up, you have to think about where to fit a staircase, and how to support the weight of the new walls and roof on the existing ground floor walls. It's not often the case that the arrangement of rooms at the ground floor suits the accommodation you want upstairs. Sometimes you are lucky, but often, to make it work you have to produce some interesting structural alterations. If it doesn't seem to fit, then you might need an architect to help you.

If you are going to expand downwards, then you have the problem in reverse. Not only do you need to consider where the stairs go, but also how you will hold up the floors and walls above.

Again, it is often important to get advice from an architect to see if your plans are structurally possible. Going downwards also involves the question of whether you will have enough height. You may have to excavate under the house, which could involve retaining walls, underpinning walls, drains, and waterproof construction. All questions for experts.



Altering the inside involves checking that the roof, or first floor, will not collapse or sag, if you take the walls out. This is usually a simple thing for a builder, architect, or structural engineer to determine.

Whichever way you end up expanding, it is absolutely essential that you check out the options before you buy, and see that you can actually fit the extra rooms on the land, on top of the house, under it, or inside.

You don't want to be in the position of having bought the house with the intention of carrying out substantial alterations, and being told by the architect that what you want to do will cost twice or three times your budget, and you'd be better off moving. It has happened.

SOMEONE ELSE'S BUILDING STYLE

A house more than 30 or so years old has almost invariably been built to someone else's building style.

Fashions in building style change with the shifts in people's preferences concerning the shape, size, design and arrangements of rooms, roofs, windows, doors, ceiling heights, verandahs, cornices, architraves, skirtings, balustrades, lights, door handles, bath tubs, stoves, tiles, etc.

Today, many people prefer open, light, sunny houses with broad verandahs or decks opening to a view. In the 'Victorian' period, the style was for solid, closed-in, rich, heavily decorated interiors with a formal facade to the street.

Australian cities often contain at least four or five styles of housing, Victorian, Federation, 'Between the wars', the 1950s and post 1970s. The exception is Canberra, which is too young to contain much more than the last three generations of housing.

There are, within these broad generations, a number of variations, which reflect shifts in fashions over the two or three decade period for which each style was popular.

The consequences, when we buy a house 30 years old or older, are that we are purchasing another generation's lifestyle preferences. We are moving into the shell of the way they liked to live their lives. If it suits us, then we will feel comfortable in the house. If not, it often costs a lot of money to change the fundamental shapes of rooms, windows, roofs, etc.

Style is a very personal affair in clothing as well as houses, even though most of the time we conform to one variety or another, of the current fashion. Still, we vary what is currently in fashion to suit our own identity.

It is important then, that we think about the style of the house we're buying before we commit ourselves. We are going to be living with the original builder's preferences for some time to come. If it doesn't feel right, it may cost more than you think to change the style.

ALTERING STYLE

Adding on to a house involves the question of whether to continue the existing style, to modify it, or to build the addition in a different style.

Additions that are stylistically sympathetic to the original design often feel more comfortable. Such additions do not jar the eye. It is still possible to introduce modern preferences for light, sun and air, within the framework of past styles. Usually this requires skilful design on the part of an architect, but it is often worth the cost and effort.

It relates very much to how we feel about that original style. If it pleases us, we are more likely to want to extend in sympathy with it. When, however, we have bought the house because of its location, or view, or backyard, or size of rooms, and not because of its style, we may feel it doesn't matter so much if the additions are in contrast.

There are no hard and fast rules. Whatever we do should be designed well. It will always be a mixture of our contemporary preferences and those of the original owners, and possibly a succession of other owners. No buildings are sacrosanct. Some of the greatest, such as Chartres Cathedral in France, and the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney, are the results of several different generations, separated by decades or even centuries, adding, altering, modifying, and doing it well.

OVERCAPITALISATION

There are not many of us who can afford to ignore the future prospect that the marketplace will not reward us if we over invest in our properties.

All homes are set within upper and lower limits of the marketplace for the neighbourhood, size of land and house, number of rooms, quality and style of construction and fitments.

The stage of the market cycle at which we buy further influences the amount we should reasonably invest in alterations. If we buy when prices are low, and demand increases, we obviously have more flexibility than buying when prices are high and demand is falling. Of course, it also depends on how long we expect to hold the property before selling.

Before buying to alter, it is important to develop a sense of surrounding market values, their upper and lower limits, and the property characteristics on which they are based. Have several real estate agents drive you around and describe the characteristics, and the limits of the marketplace in the locality you're considering.

It can save you the risk of not getting your full investment back, when and if you want to, or have to, sell. Most of us do, sometime in the future.

CAN YOU AFFORD THE COSTS?

It is one thing to decide not to overcapitalise, it is another being able to afford the costs of our dreams.

Alterations often, and sometimes, almost invariably, cost more than you might originally imagine. This is partly because there is no such thing as a 'standard' alteration, and partly because it is often difficult, in the beginning, to be clear about the best way of altering a house.

Unlike new houses, of which there are literally tens of thousands of standard types built every year, alterations can vary from redoing a kitchen, bathroom, rewiring and repainting, to ripping 70 per cent of the house apart, radically replanning it, and fundamentally changing its style.

To obtain an idea of what it may cost requires that you decide the best and most economical way to alter or add to the building, draw up plans, specify the materials, and get a builder to cost it all. Unlike the project home estimator, working with a standard plan and standard variations, it is not something that can usually be done in a few hours.

This places you in a difficult position at the time of buying. Normally you are not the only one interested in purchasing, and you may not have the time to have an architect and builder check out the planning and costing options. What should you do?

GET HELP ON DESIGN AND COST BEFORE YOU BUY

Often an architect in a short inspection of the property, if he is experienced with alterations, can tell you whether it is possible to adapt your basic ideas to the geometry and shape of the building and the land. He may also be able to provide a broad estimate of costs, or be able to have a builder do so.

It's all quite approximate, but then, it's better than guessing in the dark. It will give you an estimate of costs with which to decide whether the total purchase and alteration price is within your budget, and does not overcapitalise the property.

It also takes you out of the dark concerning how easily the house can be altered. Some houses are simply not worth the cost and the effort. Better to leave them to someone who wants it the way it is.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects' local office can help you to find an architect. Naturally the architect and/or builder who helps you out at the time of purchase can also assist with the design, drawings, specifications, costing and construction when you decide to embark on the alterations and additions.

HIDDEN PROBLEMS

Anybody who has been involved in an alteration will tell you about all the things they found which they didn't expect. In fact most building contracts for alterations will, if the architect and builder are sensible, include a contingency sum for just such unexpected events. Often it will be as high as 5 per cent or 10 per cent of the construction cost.

The reason is quite simple. Until you open up construction it is usually not possible to see the condition of materials behind surfaces. The house will often have been repainted immediately prior to sale. Paint, as everyone knows, can hide a multitude of sins. The list of hidden defects which the untrained eye may not detect, or which at times may be difficult even for the professional to spot, can be long. These can include:

- drummy and soft plaster on walls and ceilings
- wood rot in flooring joists and bearers concealed by carpet
- broken window sash cords
- rot in kitchen cupboards behind stick-on paper
- rusting gutters between two roofs
- rusted flashings around chimneys and parapets
- piers which have sunk away from timber bearers
- floors out of level due to settlement causing doors not to shut
- rusted waterpipes
- decaying electrical wiring
- cracked roof tiles
- white ant damage to timber
- tree root damage to drains
- dampness under floors because of poor drainage
- mould growth recently concealed by new paint but resulting from condensation problems
- water heaters that have reached the end of their life
- dampness in walls because of failed damp proofing courses.

All of these, and more, can be the normal condition of many houses even 10 or 20 years old, let alone 40 or 50. It is very much a case of buyer beware, and buyer obtaining expert inspection of the property prior to purchase. Without such advice you may very well buy thousands, if not tens of thousands worth of repairs and rectification work.

Again, the services offered to home buyers by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects are well worth considering as a way of putting your mind at rest, or preparing you for the worst.

ORGANISING THOSE ALTERATIONS

Many people, to save money, decide to subcontract the alterations themselves while they live in the house, trying also to do some of the work themselves.

If this is your dream, please read Chapter 11, 'Owner-Builder'. The pitfalls, risks, and challenges described apply equally to altering and adding to your own house, with the added risks of not knowing the hidden problems, and having to live with the 'works' as they go on, and linger on.

How long you, and your family, can tolerate the dust, noise, drafts, uncaring tradesmen, delays, inconvenience, disruption to family life, and weekends spent always working on the alterations, is obviously a personal question.

Some people seem to cope quite well and regularly move from one house they have just finished altering to another they are about to start. Others, who hire a builder, seem to lose all tolerance of the inconvenience and presence of tradesmen and strangers in their house within two to three months.

Alterations and additions contracted out to a builder, if they are at all substantial, and involve adding rooms, changing the roof, rearranging internal rooms, kitchen, bathrooms, rewiring and replumbing, can often run from 4 or 5 months to 6 or 9 months. If it's a major alteration it is often saner to move out into rented accommodation. The increased cost is usually well repaid in peaceful nights and weekends.

If moving out is not financially possible, then carefully investigate the time you, or the builder, are going to take in completing the alterations. If it's a builder, add a minimum of 15-20 per cent for delays due to wet weather, strikes, materials or subcontractors not being available on time and simply poor management. If you intend doing the work, add anywhere between 25-50 per cent, or even 100 per cent, to your first estimates of the time it will take for the very same reasons, plus the fact that you will be the most unpredictable contractor on the job. In fact, in realistically assessing what you expect to achieve, test yourself as you would an unknown and untried subcontractor, who was trying to persuade you that he was just the man for the job. Trying yourself out with the questions you might ask such a subcontractor may produce some revealing insights. Re-read Chapter 11 and in particular, the sections on contracts and employees, and see how you would measure up. Also re-read the section 'Doing Some of the Work Yourself'.

As with a new house, the key to successfully altering your own house is organisation. The more carefully you plan and prepare, the more likely things will go smoothly, finish when you expect, and avoid various household members wanting to move out.

Careful planning also prepares the family for the excitement ahead. It's often easier to tolerate mess and inconvenience when you know what to expect, and how long you'll have to live with it. The objective is achieving better housing, not grounds for family breakup. The art is in making it fun, and an adventure for all, in the shortest possible time. So plan well.