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The perfect house deserves to go on the perfect block of land. The block you buy is the foundation in more ways than one. It allows you to reach out and expand your lifestyle into the open air. It is the basis of your residential 'estate', in the old traditional sense of the word.

NOT MANY BLOCKS ARE PERFECT

There are not many perfect blocks of vacant land. However, with careful consideration, inspection and investigation, it is possible to maximise the satisfaction and return from your investment. Buying land is probably the second most expensive purchase, after a house, that many of us will make.

LAND IS NOT JUST A REAL ESTATE ASSET

From the domestic point of view, a block of land is not just a piece of real estate. It is first and foremost a source of satisfaction for residential and domestic needs and preferences. Apart from being affordable, it must satisfy many other criteria before it is really acceptable.

CRITERIA TO MEASURE ITS WORTH

There are a dozen criteria you should take into account when assessing land on which to build. They are:

- 1 Sufficient space** to allow you to build the house, garage or carport, swimming pool, decks, terraces, verandahs and to develop the gardens you need or desire;
- 2 Micro-climate** that provides for comfortable living in your locality;
- 3 Views and outlook** which are pleasant or spectacular;
- 4 Access** to enable you to drive your car(s), and other vehicles safely off the street, park, shelter or garage them, in a suitable location, while also providing adequate pedestrian access from the street to the front door;
- 5 Privacy** enabling you to locate, or design your house and garden to ensure your neighbours and the public cannot see directly into living and sleeping areas.

- 6 The cost of building on the land** should be within your construction budget.
- 7 Stability** of the ground, and below ground foundation material, should be structurally satisfactory, or able to be made so, within your construction budget.
- 8 No unreasonable risks** should arise from stormwater, flood or bush fire and there should be no difficulties in supplying water, electricity, sewerage, septic or gas, or if so, the cost of necessary preventative or servicing measures can be accommodated within your construction budget.
- 9 Garden** soil and ground drainage should allow you to grow the flora, and develop the garden you desire.
- 10 Legal constraints** resulting from the title, Councils or other authorities, such as electricity, sewerage, stormwater, road works, maritime authorities or the like, should have no unusual effects, or if they do, these should not constrain your capacity to design, construct, finance, and landscape.
- 11 Value for money** The land should represent normal value for money in the market place. If not, you will have to be prepared to accept the resale consequences.
- 12 You can afford it** Can you afford it?

USING THESE CRITERIA

Criteria 1 through 5, 'Space, Micro-climate, Views, Access and Privacy', are covered in Chapter 3, and in Chapter 10. These chapters should be reviewed before deciding to buy.

Criteria 6, 'The cost of building on the land', is also reviewed in Chapter 10. It is important to realise certain costs cannot be calculated without knowing on which block of land you will build. The cost of drives, excavations, site drainage, footings, foundation walls, and connection of water, electricity, gas and sewerage or septic cannot be known without reference to the particular design on the actual site. Estimates of these costs can be obtained from professionals such as architects, engineers and builders. If the block appears unusual, or you have doubts, it is wise to seek advice on these costs from an appropriate and experienced professional.

Criteria 7, 'Stability', in strict technical terms, can only be assessed after investigation by a qualified geotechnical engineer. Many blocks of land do not require such assessment. However, if the land is steep, has rocky outcrops, is in a known slip area (often designated by the local Council), shows evidence of clay strata, is sandy or silty, gives evidence of being subject to water erosion or drainage problems, or you intend to significantly excavate, it is wise to consult a geo-technical engineer. In slip areas, Councils will often require a geotechnical engineering report before approving a building application. The cost of such reports is often less than 1 or 2 per cent of the purchase price and could save you thousands of dollars later, or prevent an unwise purchase.

Criteria 8, 'No unreasonable risks', can usually be assessed either by talking to neighbours, if there are any, or to the local Council building inspector or bush fire officer, water, electricity and gas supply authorities, as well as the local fire brigade. They are important considerations, as the property damage arising from failure to protect against such risks is often considerable and sometimes total. The costs of servicing can also be substantial on difficult sites.

Criteria 9, 'Gardens', is relevant, if specialised flora and garden design are important to you. The first sources of information are local gardening enthusiasts, garden clubs, Council's parks and gardens department, and of course, nurseries. If you are assessing a country property, the local officers of the state forestry and agricultural departments can also be of assistance.

Criteria 10, 'Legal constraints', is discussed in Chapter 5. The final responsibility for the legal aspects of this assessment must lie with your solicitor. The design questions are for you and your architect or designer to decide.

Criteria 11, 'Value for money', is a matter of shopping around to get a sense of current and comparative market values, and talking to real estate agents.

Criteria 12, whether 'you can afford it', is for you, your family or household, financial advisers and financiers to decide. It is put as the last criteria, simply because only after assessing the land against the other criteria, will you be able to decide whether it's worth affording in the first place.

Remember, land is the foundation of your residential amenity.