

Houses ripe for renovation

In this first of a series into renovating housing, we look at the reasons people are deciding to upgrade their existing dwellings rather than move.

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IT HAS traditionally been a part of our New Zealand DNA to undertake additions and alterations to our existing homes. From minor dwelling alterations to extreme total makeovers, the draw of changing our own residential built environment has been irresistible.

Principles to smoother projects

When I graduated and began my architectural career, I worked in an architectural firm that had thrived in Wellington for almost a century. We undertook an exciting variety of projects, from multi-million dollar new commercial buildings right down to modest house alterations.

As a junior staff member, I did my fair share of so-called adds and alts. I learned to love this work and developed a healthy respect for the potential to change these homes and, with this, the lives of the occupants.

I still enjoy residential renovation projects, but they now range from still modest budget alterations to multi-million dollar upgrades



A well-planned small addition can transform the liveability of a modest home.



Steel portal frames can meet bracing demand when opening up internal spaces.

to existing dwellings. Yet even across these budgetary extremes, the fundamental principles that create good results are consistent and familiar. There are design and building processes and sequences that help these projects flow more smoothly and have proven to help guide us to the best outcomes.

It starts with the owner

The primary factor of every refurbishment or renovation project is the owner of the home - someone who has decided to stay put and improve the existing building to meet their requirements.

If they are owner-occupants, they will have their dreams and aspirations for the project, and the first task is for the designer to listen to them and take the brief for their requirements.

The owners may initially proffer their ideal solutions to their needs, but the final design will often reinterpret these proposed solutions to their requirements.

An experienced designer may propose fresh new solutions and concepts unfamiliar to the owner, the bylaws and building regulations may preclude their suggestions or the budget may be stretched - even before the drawings start!

Advocating for the building

At this juncture, I feel I have to not only take on board the client's wishes but begin advocating for the building.

As a designer with many years' experience in this field, I might see aesthetic aspects and historical or physical features of the building that the client may not appreciate or may be unaware of. These features may merit conservation or may provide a design cue to inform and integrate the proposed new work with the character of the existing building.

Reasons to stay and renovate

The reasons owners want to rejuvenate their existing homes are many and varied.

The most common reason I currently hear is that the neighbourhood has become the owners' preferred locality. Children may have settled into the local schools, and the family feels part of the community.

Many older homes are also located in prime city locations but suffer from incorrect orientation - for example, bungalows typically facing towards the street, poor existing layouts and maybe deterioration due to deferred maintenance.

These dwellings are ripe for renovation, and the owners' lifestyles can be transformed when the home is redesigned to take advantage of the sun, views and other botanical or natural features on or adjacent to the property.

Another bond attaching the owner to the home may be the real estate agent's old chestnut - it has good bones. Renovation offers the chance to remedy the lack of modern fixtures and services and will often include a redesign to make good any inappropriate previous alterations.

Renovating with sustainability in mind

Clients have become far more knowledgeable about the concepts of sustainability when renovating. I have often been briefed to avoid wastage of precious resources. Incorporating second-hand or salvaged materials or fixtures in the project is common, especially recycled native timber floorboards and salvaged or restored traditional or period timber doors and window joinery.

Window joinery can be modified to accept modern insulating glass units, and with the low thermal bridging performance of timber, these hold their own alongside much contemporary commercial joinery in common use.

Clients are now also often fully conversant with concepts such as embodied energy when considering replacement costs.

It is heartening to find enthusiasm for these fundamental principles at the ➤

grassroots level early in the client and designer relationship.

These basic sustainability beliefs can help lead seamlessly into the compatibility and enhancement of the renovations with the character of the existing building.

A step onto the property ladder

As property prices reach stratospheric levels, the physical value of the existing dwelling itself becomes more significant, especially to young and first-home buyers - although maybe not to developers. If the condition of the existing house is substandard, in nearly all but extreme cases, the most practical and relatively affordable option is to refurbish.

It is the most cost-effective option when compared with the cost of design and consenting fees for a new building, demolishing the existing house, rental

accommodation and relocation and the building costs.

On the positive side, the renovation project and costs can be staged to suit the client's timetable, and a lot of the work can be undertaken by the owners themselves.

Renovations to older homes have been the traditional way for generations of New Zealanders to begin their climb up the property ladder. People purchased modest houses, sometimes doer-uppers, and built up the value of their properties.

Many houses ripe for an upgrade

While traditionally villas and bungalows have been targeted for renovation, almost any dwellings built pre-1980s are now seen as ripe for upgrade.

The performance benchmarks set by contemporary residential construction such

as thermal efficiency, air quality, access and services can be met by retrofitting and renovating existing housing stock at a relatively affordable cost and a significantly lower carbon cost than building new.

As is clear, we appear unable to build new dwellings at anywhere near the rate currently required to safely house our population. Waiting lists for residential accommodation have quadrupled over the last few years, with no signs of abating any time soon.

For this reason, renovation and revitalisation of our existing residential building stock must become a greater part of the solution to our housing shortage. ◀

Note ▶ The next part in this series will look at the dos and don'ts to renovating character homes.