

renovation

The fix is in

... For profit and fun, makeovers remain our national pastime, reports Claire Halliday



ABOVE right: Before and after the Chevron Island renovation. BELOW: The pool and timber deck with spectacular water views.



GO TO any hardware barn on even the wettest of weekends and the evidence is there: customers laden with DIY kits signing up for workshops that will help them attempt projects that were once only tackled with a union ticket. Australians spent more than \$28 billion in home

improvement and related expenses in the 2006-07 financial year, up from \$26 billion in 2005-06, according to the Housing Industry Association. Figures show the average thorough renovation now soaks up about \$96,000, up from \$60,000 five years ago.

Why are renovations so appealing? "Moving is expensive and many people like where they live," says Archicentre's state manager David Hallett. "So rather than adapting themselves to the house, they adapt the house to their needs."

Location, of course, is everything. Want to maximise value on a house makeover? Make sure the renovation project is in a position that will warrant the cost of the improvements. If renovating purely for profit, a realistic estimate of how long the project will take is crucial. Delays caused by permits, the weather and unexpected structural problems can all help blow the budget.

Good foundations are essential. "Ensure the original building is in sound condition," Hallett says. According to Archicentre pre-purchase inspections, one in three properties in Victoria has a problem with cracking.

"Find out if the property has restrictive planning, building, or title controls that might affect your renovation ideas," he says. "On the positive side, look out for opportunities to capture views or improve the orientation."

When it came on to the market in November 2005, Queensland-based business developer Stephen Kirkham, 55, saw potential in the 1970s brick townhouse pictured above left. The asking price was \$1.6 million but the waterfront position on Queensland's Chevron Island, with 180-degree views and the Gold Coast skyline in the distance, made it an investment risk worth taking. "I knew I wanted to build something special," he says.

Melbourne-based architects Vibe Design Group, with builder David Levestam Constructions, had an uninspiring starting point. The original consisted of double brickwork, a pitched tiled roof, a slab on the ground level and a suspended slab to the upper-storey.

"Consideration was given to demolishing the existing residence but it was decided, after much deliberation, to renovate – mostly owing to current demolition costs (and) the solid nature of the



Renovation trends

1. Low-maintenance living: Paint-free architecture, earthy textures. Paved courtyards, weed-free gardens with an emphasis on native plants. Polished timber flooring is the epitome of low-maintenance.
2. Indoor/outdoor: Alfresco, open-air, call it what you will, but this trend has longevity. Ideally flowing from an open-plan kitchen, dining and living area into a sophisticated timber and glass structure over a deck with barbecue centrepiece.
3. Garden design: Multiple light-wells and courtyards around the house, bringing light and views into bedrooms and living areas.
4. Multi-purpose room: To compensate for the absence of yard space in inner-city areas.
5. Home office: As technologies improve, more people are able to conduct business from home. The home office is now an essential feature for the modern business person and is expected to grow in popularity.

Source: Archicentre

existing structure," says Vibe managing director Michael O'Sullivan.

The property was something of a rabbit warren. The kitchen, dining and lounge were all divided by walls. The two storeys functioned with separate accesses and no internal staircase. The ground floor's reduced ceiling height created a "dungeon-like feel", and the garage was smaller than current minimum requirements.

The resulting renovation – a three-bedroom, three-bathroom, two-storey house with rumpus room, lounge, bar, dining, kitchen, good storage, walk-in-ropes, and deck – might incorporate 70 per cent of the existing structure but it's unrecognisable from its drab beginnings. It satisfies O'Sullivan's aesthetic requirements and is also functional and sustainable.

With the existing dwelling already set back the minimum distance from the street, O'Sullivan says an illusion of depth has been made possible with the introduction of a stainless steel portal and metal batten feature. The latter also provides sun protection and a visual screen.

Many touches in the renovation were designed to be multi-purpose. The garage was extended out to the external stairwell and incorporates a dumb waiter to the kitchen, located on the upper storey.

Getting value for your dollar

1. Get a realistic appraisal of what your property is worth, before and after the planned renovation. Find out what buyers in the area are looking for. For example, creating a third bedroom might create more value than adding a second ensuite and walk-in robes.
2. Will your renovation cost more than 30 per cent of the value of the existing property? Consider moving.
3. Time is money. In Melbourne renovators are experiencing lengthy delays. It can often take between six and 12 months for planning permits to be issued.
4. All that glitters is not always gold. Spas, home theatres and swimming pools might not add guaranteed value. Cleverly planned and landscaped outdoor entertaining areas, car parking and studies usually do.
5. Little details can make a difference. Spending money on some thoughtful plantings in the garden, and basic refurbishments that focus on floor and wall coverings, can be more worthwhile than tackling a large-scale project involving expensive structural changes.
6. Five-star fixtures and fittings – even when selling to the premium real-estate market – are usually wasted money. Think good quality, rather than best for the best return on your investment.
7. Light, bright and neutral is better than bold and fashion forward. Appealing to the masses will create more chance of a bidding war.

In such an extensive renovation, O'Sullivan says the company's involvement in the project extends beyond rearranging walls and plumbing fixtures, to the specification of interior finishes, cabinet design, electrical details and even landscaping. Colours were chosen to last the distance, giving a nod to current fashion without being tied to a look that would quickly date.

O'Sullivan says success in a renovation hangs on the ability to "wholly understand the needs and desires" of clients. He must be on to something – the property has won a Building Designers Association of Queensland award.

It's again on the market and owner Kirkham says the profit will be less than anticipated: "I did this home as if I was doing it for myself."

Websites: archicentre.com.au; vibedesign.com.au



Skylights are a feature of the open-plan upper floor sitting room.

Address: 273 Stanhill Drive, Chevron Island
Agent: Coldwell Banker
Contact: (07) 5592 0188
Quote: About \$3 million
Sale: By private treaty

