

THE DREAM HOME STARTER GUIDE

Where beautiful ideas become healthy, sustainable homes

A calm, practical guide for planning a custom home, renovation or extension —
before design begins.

For families across Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, the Hunter, Central Coast and Sydney.

RESIDENTIAL STUDIO

Healthy • sustainable • considered homes

A clearer place to begin

Planning a new home or major renovation is exciting — but it can also feel overwhelming.

You might be wondering:

- Where do we begin?
- How much should we realistically budget?
- Do we need a DA or CDC?
- Who should we speak to first?
- How do we avoid costly mistakes before design even starts?
- How do we make sure the home supports our family, site and long-term plans?

This guide will help you take the first step with more clarity, confidence and calm.

START HERE

Use this guide as a simple planning tool before you speak with an architect, builder, council or consultant. You do not need to have everything figured out — you just need a clear starting point.

1. Begin with the way you want to live

Before thinking about floor plans, finishes or Pinterest images, take a step back. The best homes begin with real life.

Ask yourself:

- What currently frustrates you about your home?
- Which spaces does your family use most?
- Where do you need more light, airflow, storage or privacy?
- How should your indoor and outdoor spaces connect?
- What would make mornings, evenings and weekends easier?
- Will your family's needs change over the next five to ten years?
- What would make daily life feel calmer, healthier and more enjoyable?

A successful home is not simply beautiful. It supports the people living in it.

TRY THIS

Write a short “day in the life” description of how you want your future home to feel. Include school mornings, work-from-home days, entertaining, quiet time, outdoor living and storage.

Quick notes

- What is not working now?
- What do you want to feel more of at home?
- What are your non-negotiables?

2. Understand your site

Every property has opportunities and constraints. These will shape what can be designed, approved and built.

Your site may be influenced by:

- Sunlight and orientation
- Views and privacy
- Slope and existing ground levels
- Bushfire, flooding or coastal conditions
- Trees and vegetation
- Neighbouring buildings
- Access, parking and driveway requirements
- Easements and underground services
- Council planning controls
- Existing structures, services and drainage

Understanding these conditions early can help avoid expensive redesigns later. It also allows the best qualities of the site — light, outlook, breeze, garden, privacy and connection — to shape the home from the beginning.

HELPFUL DOCUMENTS TO GATHER

Survey, existing house plans, sewer or drainage diagrams, council planning certificates, previous approvals, specialist constraint information, and any correspondence from council, certifiers or consultants.

3. Establish a realistic project budget

Your total project budget needs to cover more than construction. Allow for:

- Architectural fees
- Consultant fees
- Survey and site investigations

- Council, certifier and authority fees
- Engineering and specialist reports
- Construction costs
- Interior finishes and fixtures
- Landscaping, driveways and external works
- Temporary accommodation, if required
- Furniture, window furnishings and appliances
- A sensible contingency

Be open about your budget from the beginning. Clear financial boundaries help your architect prioritise the spaces, features and materials that matter most.

Good design is not about adding more. It is about making thoughtful decisions and investing in the right areas.

BUDGET REMINDER

If your construction budget is \$X, your total project budget will usually need to be higher once design fees, consultants, approvals, external works and contingency are included.

Budget prompts

- What is your comfortable total project budget?
- What is your absolute upper limit?
- Which items are essential?
- Which items could be staged later?
- What level of finish are you hoping for?

4. Find out which approval pathway applies

Depending on your property and proposed work, your project may require a Development Application, Complying Development Certificate or other approvals.

Development Application — DA

A DA is assessed against council planning controls. It may be required where the proposal does not meet complying development requirements or where the site has additional constraints.

Complying Development Certificate — CDC

A CDC can provide a more streamlined approval pathway when the property and proposed design satisfy all applicable requirements.

Other approvals

Some projects may also require additional approvals relating to:

- Plumbing and drainage
- Heritage
- Bushfire
- Flooding
- Tree removal
- Driveway access
- Stormwater
- Coastal conditions
- Subdivision or boundary matters

The correct pathway should be investigated before the design progresses too far.

COMMON MISTAKE

Do not assume your neighbour's approval pathway will apply to your property. Small differences in zoning, lot size, slope, setbacks, overlays or previous approvals can change the process.

5. Assemble the right project team

Depending on your site and project, you may need:

- Architect
- Registered surveyor
- Town planner
- Structural engineer

- Stormwater or civil engineer
- Geotechnical engineer
- Bushfire consultant
- Energy assessor
- Landscape designer
- Interior designer
- Quantity surveyor
- Builder
- Certifier

Bringing the right people into the project at the right time helps reduce delays, conflicting advice and unexpected costs.

WHO SHOULD COME FIRST?

An architect can usually help you understand which consultants are needed, when they should be engaged and what information is required before design or approval work begins.

6. Design for a healthy, sustainable home

Healthy and sustainable design does not need to feel complicated. Start with the fundamentals:

- Position living spaces for useful natural light
- Plan for effective cross-ventilation
- Provide appropriate shading
- Improve insulation and building-envelope performance
- Choose durable, low-maintenance materials
- Consider low-toxicity finishes
- Include practical water and energy-saving measures
- Create meaningful connections to gardens and nature
- Design adaptable spaces that can change with your family

These decisions can improve everyday comfort while reducing energy use and supporting long-term wellbeing.

HEALTHY HOME PRIORITIES

Think about comfort, natural light, fresh air, quiet spaces, thermal performance, connection to nature and materials that feel good to live with every day.

7. Create a clear project brief

Your project brief becomes the foundation for the design. Include:

- The people who will live in the home
- The spaces you need
- How you want the rooms to connect
- Your preferred architectural style
- Your priorities and non-negotiables
- Your approximate construction budget
- Your desired timeframe
- Any future needs
- Images that communicate the atmosphere you love

Separate your ideas into three groups.

Must have

The essential requirements the project cannot succeed without.

Would love

Features you would like to include if space and budget allow.

Future possibility

Ideas that could be planned for now and completed later.

BRIEF-BUILDING TIP

A clear brief does not need to be long. It needs to be honest, practical and prioritised.

8. Avoid these common early mistakes

- Designing before understanding the site
- Setting a construction budget without allowing for other project costs
- Choosing a builder purely on the lowest price
- Changing the brief repeatedly after detailed work has begun
- Selecting finishes before the overall design is resolved
- Underestimating external works, drainage and landscaping
- Focusing only on resale value instead of how the home needs to function
- Rushing into drawings without a clear approval strategy
- Waiting too long to understand budget, approvals and consultant requirements

A little more preparation at the beginning can prevent significant delays and costs later.

Your first project checklist

Before beginning design:

- ☐ Write down your goals and priorities
- ☐ Confirm an initial total project budget
- ☐ Gather your property information
- ☐ Locate any existing plans and approvals
- ☐ Arrange a current site survey if required
- ☐ Collect a small selection of inspiration images
- ☐ Identify your preferred timeframe
- ☐ List your must-haves, would-loves and future possibilities
- ☐ Note any site concerns, such as slope, trees, drainage, bushfire or privacy
- ☐ Book an initial architectural consultation

Keep your project in one calm place

Use the Residential Studio Client Project Dashboard Template as a simple starting point for organising your project information.

Duplicate the template into your own Notion workspace, then add notes, files, decisions and tasks as the project develops.

MAKE IT EASIER

The goal is not to create a complicated system. The goal is to keep all important project information in one calm, organised place.

Continue the guide series

Next, move through to 02 — The Design & Approval Roadmap to understand the design process, approval pathways and key decisions before your project progresses.

Ready to take the next step?

Residential Studio designs thoughtful, healthy and sustainable family homes across Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, the Hunter, Central Coast and Sydney.

We can help you understand your site, clarify the likely approval pathway and establish the right next steps before you commit to a full design process.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR PROJECT

Share your property, ideas, budget and timeframe through the Residential Studio project enquiry form.

RESIDENTIAL STUDIO

Custom homes • renovations • additions