Episode 170 - House Design Decisions That Are Hard to Change Later

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Welcome to My Forever Home, the podcast. Today, I'm going to be talking to you about decisions for your home that are not easily changed. So, what are some of the permanent things that we need to decide on really early as part of the design process that are either never able to be changed or are going to be incredibly costly to be changed?

And I'm not talking about a color of tile that you may dislike over time or anything like that. I'm actually talking about the real heavy lifting design decisions that you need to decide on early on in the process. I'm gonna give you a high level overview today, because these are the things that sometimes I find clients are really unaware that they can have such big knock-on effects for how you live comfortably and flexibly.

Is that a word? In a flexible way within your home. And what I mean by that is having flexibility to have different layouts and so forth Um, so this, let's start with the hard to change decisions. And I think one of the, one of the philosophies that I had particularly when I, when I'm working with clients all the time, but also when I built my own house 13, f- not 13 years ago, is what are the things, you know, think about it like this, what are the things that sh- uh, you know, costly, 'cause construction's costly and, and, and so forth, but what are the things that we need to put our money into because they are going to be impossible to change?

Like the envelope of the building is, you know, you either have a massive extension or whatever, but let, let's just say for argument's sake that, that pretty much is, you're stuck with the envelope of the building. But what are some of the other things that, um, are going to be really costly to change, you know, hard decisions, hard to change decisions?

So one of them is, I always say, max out on your insulation. Yes, you can add this into the ceiling later on or, or replace it and so forth, but it's painful. And in the walls, it's sometimes impossible. And also, uh, depending on whether you're on a slab or, um, or not, insulation underneath. So insulation, cladding, that's difficult to change.

So the sort of cladding that you're going to choose is important. And windows. They are such a big cost of your home, and yet they are, I find, not given as much attention as what they need. Not only their location, but their size, where they're positioned in the, in the room. Um, they are really big ticket items.

And then the one that actually doesn't cost anything but massively affects how your home i- performs, uh, throughout the seasons is the orientation, and the orientation of windows as well. So think about those. They're, they're sort of my absolute core. They're expensive, um, and it affects so many different things around your home.

Stuff that is hard to change. Yes, you can go and renovate a kitchen. You can renovate a bathroom when it becomes tired or so forth. Bench tops and things might be difficult to change. You may need to rip out the whole kitchen. But replacing windows, that is a really big headache and a big cost. So pri- prioritize those permanent decisions first, and they're the ones that I would regard as permanent.

Furniture and styling can wait. Paint colors, they can wait. There's 10,000 different paint colors. Um, you need to think about the structure, wall placements and so forth first. Think 10 to 20 years ahead. And I mean, this is something that I talk about so much, but in different ways and, and across different topics.

But thinking about how the longevity of your home in terms of flexibility of spaces. So what are some of the structural decisions that can shape your home? Ceiling heights is definitely one. You cannot change those later on. Now obviously, the higher the ceiling, the more spacious the space feels. Um, yes, it costs more to have a higher ceiling, but the benefits really, really are, um, uh, outweigh that, that cost.

Now, I'm not being flippant about saying that you've got an unlimited budget, but 2.4 for a ceiling is too low Particularly downstairs. Upstairs in bedrooms you can just get away with it, but 2.6 to 2.7 ideally, 2.7 would be really your bare minimum. Downstairs or in your open plan livings and kitchens and, and so forth, an absolute must.

I would never, ever go anything beyond, um, you know, lower than 2.7. It also affects some of the light fittings you may wanna have in your home. Um, I had a client who, who, um, they did an owner builder style home, and everything was 2.4. It was a money-saving exercise, and all the pens that she wanted in the home were just not able to be, um, installed because the ceilings were just too low.

And walking into that home, it felt like you were being crushed down. It felt like you had to, um, you know, bob your head even though you weren't hitting the ceiling. It just felt low. And of course, with that, not as much light comes in. So having, you know, if you've got the ability and the luxury, and it is a luxury to have three-meter ceilings, 3.3, absolutely do it in those open plan living areas, because it does make a big difference.

That sense of space and the natural light that comes flooding into your home makes a really big, um, a big, big impact. Rule of thumb though, nothing below 2.7. Upstairs, 2.4 in bedrooms at an absolute push. The other thing is your heating and cooling. So that is a really difficult, expensive thing to change, so make sure you're getting that right.

I'm not gonna go through heating and cooling and what all the options are here. You need to speak to a heating and cooling expert. I know I've spoken about, um, different types of heating, um, before in, in other episodes. Hydronic and how I would, had my heart set on hydronic. But just think about your heating and cooling solutions and, um, and what they may be, because that's a fairly permanent thing.

Your internal wall locations are another one, um, in terms of the size of the spaces, your furniture placement, the room proportions. And what I always harp on about is that future flexibility. What sort of flexibility are you going to have in what that room can be over time? But also the furniture placement.

You really don't wanna have a room where you're locked in to, you must have the bed in one location. Ideally, that's what you're trying to avoid. Sometimes it is difficult to avoid that in a bedroom. But certainly in living areas and so forth, you definitely don't wanna be fixed that sofas and chairs and things like that have to be in a certain location.

Door openings are also really important. Very tricky to move. Um, but the swing direction. The, the door swing can actually affect how you place furniture in the space. Um, it may be that, um, you can do a sliding door instead to create a bigger sense of space. Um, so think about that as well. And then furniture clearance.

So it's a, that's around how you flow around furniture. You need to have the space to be able to move around furniture. And as I say to clients, what you see on a floor plan is, with a furniture placement, it often feels like there's a lot of space. So what you see on a floor plan is a lot more spacious than what it's going to be in real life.

So err on the side of caution when you're looking at space. You need to have that flow. Minimum, minimum, minimum, minimum one meter between all of the different, um, furniture that you have. Window sizes and positions. Now, this is an area that I see ... Look, it's one of, one of the most important in my book And yet it is, it's, it's not looked at in as much detail as I think it needs to be.

I was with, um, a client last week for a floor plan sanity check, and we were really looking at the orientation of the windows, but also the height. And I suggested that it doesn't need to be floor-to-ceiling, uh, windows in bedrooms because it actually affects the placement of your furniture, the ability to put furniture on different walls.

If this, if the window's going down to the floor, you really don't want furniture up against that, uh, window. O- one, one, it's a waste of money because you're just putting furniture in front of it. Glazing's expensive. Um, but also it's not ideal to protect your furniture anyway because of the sun.

So think about natural light, think about the sun orientation and how big those windows are when they're facing west, when they're facing north.

Think about your cross-ventilation. How are you getting that flow? So the window placement is really important. Think about privacy. You've also gotta consider overlooking. Um, views. There may be particular views. You might wanna have a bit of a highlight window that captures the sky. Um, and again, what I was just mentioning about furniture layout.

And the other thing is when you're looking at windows, and as I was talking about floor to ceiling in bedrooms, is that you need to be able, in all rooms, and windows definitely affect this, or, and doors, is that furniture layout. And you definitely no- don't wanna be fixed with one layout because a door is in a particular location or, uh, the window is in a particular location or a particular size, that it really limits what you can do in that space.

Sometimes really massive oversized windows, um, are not the key and not the solution 'cause they limit so much. Funnily enough, in my own home, um, when we were designing our home, um, you know, the architect had windows in our living area on every wall. And I said, "Well, actually, I need some walls for my artwork."

And I had two enormous pieces of art that I brought back from Amsterdam, and I was finally able to have them side by side. They were a pair. I'd only ever been able to have one up, um, because I lived in small apartments. And so I got rid of the south-facing windows because I had beautiful north-facing, um, floor-to-ceiling, um, windows and also a small window facing west that was heavily shaded with deciduous trees.

So I didn't need those south-facing windows. Instead, I wanted art. So think about that, too. Art needs a place. I find, um, particularly when I'm doing floor plan sanity checks, that, um, there's so many windows and so much glazing that you've actually got no space for your art. So if you've got really significant art that is, really means something to you, make sure you've got a wall for it.

Then the other thing is, so they're structural things, then we gotta think about what some of the services are. Now, once services are roughed in, they're difficult to move. Once you've had the plaster in, they're even harder to move. So yes, things can be moved, but this is costly, costly, costly, and it's certainly not something that you wanna move into a newly renovated home or, um, or m- newly renovated or a new home and find that, "Oh my goodness, me, I really didn't want this in that spot."

It's difficult to change plumbing. So think about your kitchens. Y- this is where elevations are gonna be your best friend because you know where the sink's going, you know where your dishwasher's going. You know that there's a proper flow. And just looking at the floor plan, you get a rough idea, but once you've done the elevations, you can really see where that plumbing needs to be.

Same with your bathrooms, same with your laundry. Think also about plumbed-in fittings. Um, fridges that, uh, need plumbing in for their water taps, and also, um, plumbed-in coffee machines if

you are that way inclined. Like, my husband was and is, and I'm very grateful to have a plumbed-in coffee machine, I have to admit.

Think about your toilet position for location in terms of privacy, for layout efficiencies, for avoiding opening the door and being directly on the loo. Again, all of this is going to come out in your internal, uh, elevations to make sure that everything is in the right location. And then of course, your builder's gonna work off those for their roughing in and service provisions Um, and you may wanna allow for future upgrades.

So in my own home we don't have a fridge with an ice or water dispenser. However, I future-proofed that decision because I didn't know what I may want later on, and we do have provision for water being plumbed into our fridge if we wanted it. So think about that as well. And think about smart home technology.

Gone are the days where C bus was installed and the whole house had to be wired. Everything's now Bluetooth. But maybe think about some of that home technology that you may wanna install now, or even that you think, "I can't afford to do it now, but I need to provision for it, um, later on." Y- your sparky may need to do things so that you can do that.

The other thing I'll always say as well is do a DC conduit for any solar power, uh, solar panels that are going to go on the roof. Again, it may not be something that you can afford to do at the renovation/new build stage. It may be something that you're going to do later on. Make sure that there's a DC conduit to the roof so that that can be easily installed when you go to do that.

The other thing is maybe grey water. Um, if you've got a water tank and you wanna be able to use your, um, t- tank, ah, tank, water from the tank for grey water, um, which is to flush your loos, it may be for your washing machine, it may be to water your garden or even fil- fill up your pool, if it's a natural pool, um, then you need to make sure that that's provisioned for as well.

Um, some people even wanna have their water tanks, um, hooked up to their showers. You need special provision for that, so plan for this early on. Then what about the small details that can actually make a big difference? Things like power point locations. So yes, you can get power points, uh, installed later on, sometimes, not all the time.

So I always say sort of overdo it a little bit on your power points when in doubt. Particularly in bedrooms, you wanna ma- think about where can a bed go in this room? Where do I need power points then for, for lamps and so forth? So normally, I would have power points on a minimum, double power points, a minimum of two walls in any bedroom.

Um, sometimes it's even on three walls, just so that you've got that flexibility. It's always better to have an additional power point than not to have, or to ha- than to have one less. Because there's nothing more frustrating than you want to have a lamp, you want to vacuum, or you just wanna pu- plug in an appliance, and you can't do that because, uh, there's not enough power points.

So when you're going through that renovation or build phase, an additional power point is actually not that much extra. But when you've gotta come back and bring a sparky in to do that later on, and if you can do that later on, but depending on where the wiring is, that's just a pain, and it's more costly.

Think about charging stations. Where do you want those to be? Where do you want all the devices to be? Are you going to have a central location where everyone charges their, uh, devices in the same space? Um, and also then think about where your kitchen appliances are going to go so that you've got the power points in the right location.

Shower niche pla- placement. You get one crack at this, uh, and I see so many mistakes with shower niches being in the wrong location, the wrong size. You know it's an afterthought. You can in five seconds know, in two seconds actually, the minute that you see it, know if that shower niche has been thought about, um, uh, incorrectly at the wrong time.

Because the tiles are not aligned, or the orientation of the shower is incorrect in relation to the, the shower niche, or it's too small for, um, bottles and what you actually wanna put in that shower niche. So that needs to be done at frame stage So before you lock in your plans, walk through each room mentally and think about, um, you know...

And at frame stage you've still got an opportunity to do this because nothing has been roughed in. But think about, "Okay, how am I going to walk through the house?" W- test your everyday routine. "Where am I gonna put my keys? Where do I think I might want a lamp?" And actually, you can do this at floor plan stage because your designer will be able, and your lighting plan will be able, to work out where those things are going to go to help you with this.

It may be that you want in-floor power points because you're going to have lamps in the middle of a, a living room. That needs to be thought about early on. You'll need your furniture layout plan to do that. Think beyond the move-in day. That's when, "Uh, oh. Mm, if only I had a power point there," or, "Oh, I really wanted to have my KitchenAid here, but I don't have a power point there now."

Um, and consider, like I always say, future lifestyle changes. What's going to be changing for you that, um, you wanna be able to create flexibility? There might be changes that you don't anticipate. Um, how, how hard is that going to work for you? Are you going to be able to do that? Ask the questions before construction starts.

Be on site frequently. Look at, um, look at the house when the frame is up. Um, things will change when the plaster goes in, but it's much harder to make changes when the plaster is in because everything's been roughed in at that stage. As I always say, changing drawings, changing on paper, is far more cost-effective than changing on site.

So really do this process with the floor plans, on the floor plans, with your designer. Challenge, challenge, challenge. Get someone else to have a look at your plans, because they may see things that you haven't thought of. Um, that's why the floor plan sanity check that I do is so incredibly

popular, because it's a second set of eyes that has n- nothing to do with the design process, and I can look at that, understanding with the questionnaire what you're trying to achieve with the home, and there's a complete second set of eyes going over that plan to challenge, question, um, provide different ideas on how that floor plan can work.

Changing anything on site is a variation and is going to cost you a lot more than changing, uh, on paper. So my closing thought for you is the best forever home isn't created with the most expensive fittings or finishes or anything like that. Yes, it looks very nice, but actually the best homes are ones that are comfortable, they're flexible, they serve you now, they're serving you into the future, and they are comfortable all year round.

And it's the permanent decisions that actually enable you to live like that, that you've made really good permanent decisions that enable all of those, um, great things that come out of it, a well-designed home. That flexibility, the comfort, um, the adaptability, uh, all of those things. Tiles can be changed, bench tops can ultimately be changed, but some of these other things that I've mentioned in this episode are a lot more difficult to change.

That's it from me this, uh, this week. I hope that that has given you some food for thought. If you are interested in a floor plan sanity check, um, go to the website. We'll put the link in the show notes as well so that you can just book directly online. There's a bit more information about how it works, um, but ultimately I go through your plans prior to meeting with you on Zoom.

Uh, I have all the plans marked up with, uh, suggestions, questions, and so forth, off the back of a questionnaire that you've provided me in advance. And then we go through that together, answer any questions that you have about some of the things I've raised, and then you get a copy of the recording and a copy of my marked up plans.

So head to the website for that. And, um, I love doing floor plan sanity checks because I find that clients get so much out of them. That's it for me. Bye for now. See you next time.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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