Episode 172: Why Floor Plans Aren't Enough for Your Home Design

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Hello, and welcome to this episode of My Forever Home, the podcast. I'm your host, Frances Cosway, and also the founder of White Pebble Interiors. Today, I'm gonna talk to you about internal elevations. Now, they are a critical component, in my opinion, of any renovation that you may be doing or a new home that you may be doing, and they really form the backbone of the outcome for that particular renovation.

Now, I always refer to them as where the design heavy lifting is done. It's where all the thinking is done. But for you, it's actually going to enable you to con- to maintain control over the outcome of your project. And hey, when you are spending so much money on the renovation or new build that you're doing for your home, you want to be able to retain control of what the outcome is going to be.

So most people think that internal elevations are technical drawings for builders and cabinet makers, but actually, they really are one of the most invaluable and important design documents for your project. And I'm gonna explain to you what they are, and I'm also going to explain to you why they're so critical, how they save you time, and they most definitely save you money.

I have had so many conversations with clients or potential clients over the years who may say, "Look, I can't really afford to invest in internal elevations." But actually, what you're really doing is kicking the can down the road in terms of what you're going to be spending. Because if you're not investing in them, in the internal elevations up front and going through that very detailed design process with your designer, I can almost guarantee you that you will be paying whatever the investment was for the elevations.

You'll pay that down the road in terms of the variations you're going to have to do and that's gonna come at a cost. Even worse, is there may be, or there may be, not is, there may be things that your

builder executes on because he doesn't really know what you're after because there are no drawings.

And the painful thing you'll have to live with then is an outcome that you're really not happy with, and that is a cost that is actually undefinable. So they are an investment, but they are an absolute worthwhile investment because you are committing a lot of money anyway, and so you wanna make sure that the outcome is going to be really what you want it to be.

And another point I'll just make here as well is there are internal elevations, and there are internal elevations. And please don't get confused with cabinetry drawings from your cabinet maker being the same as internal elevations. The cabinet maker is actually creating what he calls shop drawings, which he's producing for his machi- machines to cut the cabinetry and so forth.

And that is based off the internal elevations. He uses that as his design template, and then he puts that into his shop drawings, and he creates those for you as well to review Now, let's just go, pull- I'll pull myself right back. What are internal elevations? They're actually very different to the floor plan.

The floor plan is an aerial view of your room. So that's showing, a, a a, an amount of detail. But the internal elevation is actually a front-on drawing. So each, each wall in that room, what is on that wall, and what's the detail of what's going on that wall. So it may be cabinetry, it may be a, there'll be detail around what's the wall finish. Perhaps you're having it painted or you might have a wallpaper. That would be detailed. What are some of the fittings or fixtures or lighting that are going to go on the, on each wall? So it gives the builder and all the trades the detail around what is actually being executed well beyond what the floor plan is.

Because a floor plan is only sh- showing you one, one visual of what that space is going to be, and that's the aerial view. But if you're thinking about what the aerial view shows you versus what a front-on image is going to show you, a front-on drawing, that's going to give you detail around bench top thickness, or drawer heights, or where are there drawers versus, cupboards, and how high is the kicker.

And the list goes on, and on. It really goes on. So that sort of detail you're not going to see in a floor plan. You need to have that front-on visual. So look I am very passionate about this because often it is something that is difficult for a client to understand, and then they I can probably do that myself," or, "I can probably liaise with the builder, or liaise with the cabinet maker."

But actually, if you're liaising with your cabinet maker, that is well down the track of the build process. So the cabinet maker doesn't come in at the start of the project. He'll be coming in after rough-in. So after the pipe work's gone in and things like that, then the cabinet maker will come in.

And there are decisions that you will ... Or there may be choices that you may not be able to make anymore because it's too late. And that's the other thing with the internal elevations. Just to give you an example. We had a client who had a massive picture window in their kitchen. And because

we were doing the internal elevations for them, I was able to explain what the compromise would be if they had the big beautiful picture window, which was amazing.

The compromise would be that they wouldn't be able to have as much overhead cabinetry. So they were able to make an informed decision about what was more important for them. If they had've waited, and we did that obviously in the internal elevation stage. Now, if they had've waited The the window would have already been framed out, and by the time the cabinet maker would've come on site, they wouldn't have had the choice anymore about whether that was going to be the window or the cabinetry.

They would've been stuck with the window. Or they could possibly have paid the builder, depending on how far the d- down the track they were with the build, reframe the window so that it was a highlight window, or they remove it, and then they would've been able to get the cabinetry. Ker-ching. That costs money.

So there are so many things you're going to get out of internal elevations that are going to save you stress, they're going to save you time, they're going to save you money. The builder is going to really like you. In fact, I have builders that will not work with people who do not have internal elevations, because he knows what a headache it's going to be.

He knows that he's going to be on site and having a truckload more meetings with the client because he needs to try and extrapolate out of them as he's building, as he's trying to get the job done exactly what you want. So he just doesn't do it, because it is a nightmare, and it's gonna be a nightmare for him, and it's gonna be

Or her, and it's gonna be a nightmare for you. And if you're trying to save time and not have to be on site every five seconds, that's another reason to have the internal elevations. So what do they actually do? What do internal actually, elevations actually do for you? They are more than just cabinetry drawings.

They are a communication tool between you and your builder. They're also a communication tool between you and your designer. You have been working with your designer on these drawings, and then you're able to flesh out in detail and make changes around the design direction and exactly what you're wanting in those spaces.

It documents the design decisions and also the design direction. The other thing it gives you is a visualization tool, so you're able to visualize and see every wall. It's in 2D. 3D drawings are not the same as 2D drawings. Often there'll be a 3D drawing, and then the detail comes out in the 2D drawing.

So they're definitely not the same. A builder will need the 2D drawings because that is where the measurement, or that is where the measurements and all the detail are. They're not going to be in the 3D drawings. But it also means, the really big advantage m- is that when you're seeing something on paper, you're able to look at that without fe- feeling hurried.

You're able to review that in your own time, and then you're able to make some changes. And it's far easier to make changes on paper, same with floor plans, than what it is actually on site. But it also means that working with your designer, you're able to spot some issues. So for example if a space is tight in a bathroom just recently we were able to highlight to the client, look, when th- there's actually no wall space to fit a horizontal towel rail, so we suggest a, a vertical rail.

Or, then there have to be other changes. But we can spot issues or compromises early on and work out okay, then do we change something in that layout that means they can get what they want? But you won't be able to do that on site to the same extent. The builder just won't have time to be able to look at all the different scenarios when you don't have drawings.

It also means that you're turning your ideas into clear instruction, so it removes guesswork on site for you and the builder. It means that the, you're providing clear direction to the builder, which means he's able to provide clear direction to his trades. Everyone's working off the same set of drawings.

Builders normally have them printed off in A3, sometimes in A1. They're normally laminated, and they are constantly referring back to those drawings throughout the process because that's what all the trades are looking at. They are dog-eared. They're not just something that goes in a drawer. They are really used

You're also able to bridge the gap between the plans and reality. So it shows how everything fits together. That's what you want to be able to see. That's what you want to be able to observe and critique before you actually get a builder on board. It also improves visualization so that you can see and you're able to control the outcome, which is what I mentioned earlier

The other thing that they do, which I, was talking about earlier, was they are going to prevent costly assumptions and mistakes. So builders can't read your mind. If you're going to hand over a floor plan, that's fabulous. But they have no idea on the detail. It's not documented. And if it's not documented dot don't expect an outcome that you've got in your head to miraculously appear in real life.

That is a truckload of guesswork. And as a designer, it is actually my job to extrapolate what's in your head and work together to create the best design outcome for you. But we've got time, 'cause we're working before the builder starts. We've got time to talk through different ideas, to look at different scenarios, and to work out what's going to be best.

And maybe even challenge some of the thinking that might be going on. When you've got a builder there and he wants decisions really quickly, you lose that. And that's an important part of the design process for you to get the best outcome But your builder can't know what is in your mind around, how thick do you want your bench top?

How high do you want your bench top? Where do you want the shower niche? Are you going to have a shower niche at all, or do you prefer a shelf? Is it gonna be a shower on, coming out of the wall? Is it gonna be on a rail? Is the shower head gonna come out of the ceiling? How far down is it gonna come down from the ceiling?

He will know none of these things. Are you having wall-mounted taps? Have you got a or is it on the the bench top? Are you going to have an under mount sink or an above counter basin? Is it a toilet that's got a hidden cistern, or is it a back-to-wall toilet? He will know none of these things because it's not in the drawings.

It's a lot of guesswork. He can't get that information from the floor plans. So it's going to avoid all those interpretation errors, misunderstandings. You may have thought you told him one thing, but actually he understood something else. When it's documented, you've got something to talk to. You've got something to reference to.

You've got something to say hey, Mr. Builder, the drawing has actually said that my towel rail is gonna be at this height, but I've noticed on site that it's actually at this height." Oh, okay, so there you've got something to go back to. So that is giving you the control and the power of the outcome for your project, and it provides you together with your builder and your designer with one clear vision.

But more importantly, like I was just saying, it enables you to refer back to drawings. You've got something in your hands that's tangible to say, this is what I need you to do, Mr. Builder," when you hand over those drawings, rather than actually, Mr. Builder, I've got all these amazing ideas, but I have no idea how I'm gonna a- actually relay those to you."

And this is the investment around the internal elevations. Can you just imagine trying to do that on site? You're being led blindly about hang on, I don't know what I don't know. And, is that the right decision?" Or, "Hang on, should I do it like this?" And then the builder's spending more time with you, but you're rushed because he needs decisions quickly to be able to keep going, or the job will de- be delayed.

And that will actually be because of you. So beautifully though, it ensures that every trade is really well coordinated because they can work together and see exactly what has to happen. And so there is a consistent execution, and that's the builder's responsibility, to get all those trades together and work off those plans.

The goal though, in terms of saving you money, headaches, nightmares, disastrous outcomes, is you miner- min- minimizing the variations. Fewer changes means that you're going to be saving money. Now, I'm not going to lie, as I never do. You may still come up with variations. It's very unusual not, but the goal is to minimize them because they get expensive.

And so if you've got drawings, you are already minimizing variations. There's less rework. There's less disappointment we have ... with having an outcome that actually you can't change. I see so

many things on Facebook groups. So just to give you an example of one I see very often, and that is a shower niche that's got a metal tile trim.

It's not something that I would specify. We always do mitered edges. But if it's not in the drawings and, or you don't have any drawings, the tiler's just gonna do what he wants. He's not necessarily going to ask you. You can't assume that all of the trades are gonna communicate with you on every tiny little decision.

So you're going to end up with a metal edging. And I've seen on these Facebook groups, people are like, "Oh my goodness me, I'm so disappointed. It looks terrible." Yeah, it does. "And I didn't want that." But you cannot possibly expect without drawings for your builder to check in on every tiny detail.

Some are better than others. They're checking something like that. But you can't expect it. So if it's in the drawings, mitered edges, and they did the tile angle, you can go back and say I'm sorry, Mr. Builder. But it's really clearly documented in the elevations that I am looking for a mitered edge." And he'll have to rework it.

But if you don't have the drawings, you've got nothing to fall back on, and he's more than entitled to do the the metal edging. So that's just an example, and there are hundreds and hundreds of those. That's just one. So vari- less variations equals much better budget control for you, much better financial outcome for you.

So the other goal with the elevations is you're getting the details right before you go to site, before the build even starts. And that was, I was talking about before with, the conversations with your designer that y- and ideally with the builder involved in that as well. But there's all these pre-conversations going on nutting out different ideas.

Okay, if I make this decision it's going to then impact this. What's the lesser of the two evils? Which is exactly what I was talking about with regards to the big picture window versus having overhead cabinetry. Now, for that particular client, having the overhead cabinetry was far more important to them than having a huge picture window.

We still ended up having a window splash back, but that enabled them to have the overhead cabinetry. But we would not have been able to do that if we were not doing the internal elevations. So other details like power point and switch locations, or more, more often than not power point locations. So not all designers will do that.

We do put power point locations into the elevations. It's not replacing an electrical plan, it's actually just to highlight how these spaces work. So we've got a power point here. That's where your coffee machine's gonna go. We've got a power point there. So it's actually just giving you a really good idea about how the space can be used because where the power points are.

They might be in cupboards in drawers, and so forth. So we make sure that they're on the plans. Not all designers do that but we do that. Then you've got all your joinery layout, so that's going to enable you to have better storage. So rather than the builder come in and going, "Yep, we're just gonna put a whole lot of cupboards in," we're able to nut out the detail of how high are the drawers, or where's the bin going to go, and are we having a large bin, are we having three bins, are we having one bin?

All of these sorts of things come out in the internal elevations. And it's also gonna make sure that you've got measurements for everything rather than, a cabinetry ... shop drawings may not necessarily have measurements. I had a client recently, she was showing me some sketches or, they were done electronically, that the builder had mocked up for them.

There were just really broad measurements on those drawings. And, my question back to them was I know that they were trying to save some money, was, "Well- What are the dimensions of the drawers and the cupboards, and what's the height of the splash back? And there were just none of those drawings.

It was like, "This is the measurement for the length of the kitchen. Here's the height of the kitchen." The, the ceiling height. And there was a couple of other small measurements in there like the length of the bench. But other than that, it was a lot of guesswork that still needed to be done.

So they are... They might look like elevations because the builder showed, a, a picture for a drawing for each wall, but it didn't have detail. And that's what I was saying before. Not all ele- internal elevations are equal. You need them to have very detailed notes and measurements. Might also have again, it won't have, it's not a replacement for electrical plan or a lighting plan.

But there could be the, a beautiful feature light may be needed to be in a particular position so that it's balanced correctly with the rest of the room. That would be in an elevation. The tile, the extent of the tiling. Is it floor to ceiling? Does it step down? What's the height of the splash back?

Where are the feature tiles? What's the shape of the feature tile? What, what's going on the floor? All of that will be in the elevations as well, so your builder knows how many tiles he has to order. He also means he's going to be able to quote accurately because he knows the size of the tiles and the extent of the tiling.

All the finer details like shelves, and what's the thickness of the shelves, and where are they idea- where are they located. Hardware, the shower height. What's the tap type? Is it wall mounted? Is it bench-top mounted? Is it sink mounted? Your shower niches. In the elevations, you're able to precisely locate the shower niche based on where the tile finishes.

How many times have you seen a shower niche where it's in the middle of a tile and there's a cut in the middle of it, and it's not balanced on the wall? I see those a lot on the Facebook groups as well. And you can't fix that. That's done at frame stage. So again, that's not something that you can do when the cabinet maker comes on site.

That's actually a frame stage builder thing. So it's not in the elevations or you don't have them, don't expect that to go right, 'cause your builder actually has no idea where it's gonna finish or what you really want unless he's gonna ask you a lot of questions. So it's saving time for you and the builder.

You don't need to be on site as often. I don't know what your hourly rate is, but think about it like that. The opportunity cost of you being on site all the time versus what else you could be doing with your time. So it's fewer site meetings, last minute decisions. More often than not, I've noticed that people that don't necessarily have the elevations are also leaving all their material decisions to the last minute as well, and that's dangerous for similar sorts of reasons.

You'll end up compromising on material finishes, 'cause many need to be ordered well in advance. The other thing is there's just gonna be a lot less stress. You know that you've gone through those drawings in detail, with your partner with yourself. Gone over them, nutted them out, taken the time to review them.

You've looked at them with your designer. You've had conversations. What's the design rationale behind all of the, the design drawings? So there's less stress. It's like, "I've done my due diligence. I know that I'm confident going into the build because we've really done the thinking that's required before the builder even picks up a hammer."

Gives you more certainty, more control over the outcome. It's a really important thing to consider. You want control over the outcome. You don't just wanna throw y- your hands in the air and go, "Oh, I'm just hoping for the best. Fingers crossed. My builder's good." Doesn't matter how good your builder is, he still can't read your mind.

Better coordination with your trades because you've got the drawings, but that means a smoother workflow, so the less likelihood that you're going to have delays. And just that confidence to know I've done my due diligence. "Yep, this is what we're after. Thank you, Mr. Builder. I just need you to now execute these drawings and create what I've got documented here."

Saves time, saves money, saves stress, saves disappointment. Control the outcome. It also means that functionality, the thinking, all that thinking, what's gonna be the best functional outcome has been thought out on paper. It's been discussed. Hopefully it should've been discussed with you. We can do this. It may compromise this.

Let's work out what's the best for you. So the living and how this is all going to work for you is thought about and discussed and thought about again well before the builder starts. All the details are listed in the drawing, so it's a personalized design. There's some thinking behind future-proofing there.

I would hope so. And it's just that confidence the finished home will work exactly as you had intended because all of those conversations have happened before the execution stage. So there's

fewer regrets. You know why you've made certain decisions. That's what I always wanna arm my clients with, the reason behind the design, which is what I call the design rationale.

Because I want clients to understand why they've made certain decisions about, yes these are the elevations we have signed off on. I know why I've made the decisions around this particular design, and I'm confident with that. I know how it's gonna be working for me. Better planning, better living, better outcome.

Please don't compromise on internal elevations. As I said up the front, yes, they are an investment, and it is for a designer where the really deep thinking happens. Together with the team, with my team, we nut it out behind. We're talking about it. What about this? Hang on, maybe we could do it like this.

Oh, I know the client was talking about having it like that, but actually, why don't we present her this because this is something different again, and she may not have thought about it. That's our job, to challenge the design, to come back with a design that you may not necessarily have thought of. You may not have thought about it at all.

But that's not your job anyway. It's our job to present to you how we are solving the design challenge for you. So- That's an important part, and that's where the investment is. There's a lot of work, thinking, and time and detailing that goes into to creating those drawings. But as I hope you've realized from what I've discussed with you today, there is a reason that they really benefit you so much, and that you will ultimately pay financially, stress-wise, emotionally, regret-wise, lots of wises if you don't do them, if you don't do the investment upfront.

You will pay financially for them in some way or form down the line. You're just delaying the money coming out of your pocket really is what I believe. The ... I have actually got a blog on this topic as well. It's an incredibly popular blog about internal elevations. I'll add that into the show notes.

And of course, you can download the transcript of this podcast as well, which can be a little bit helpful, too. I know I like reading things, highlighting things. So hopefully those resources can help you, too, and and of course if you'd like us to do your internal elevations, we can do that, too.

We can a- I can also review ... If you're well down the process and you've already got internal elevations, that's no problem. I very often review our clients' elevations who have just discovered that they wanna work with me further down the track than what they n- that what they originally thought, or they've only discovered me later on in the piece.

I'm more than happy to review elevations as well. It's not quite the same, but it's definitely helpful to have another set of professional eyes going over your elevations just to see what other tweaks or things could be done. Hopefully that's helpful. Internal elevations is a minefield. It really is.

But it is, ... I would regard it as a design essential, and depending on your builder, you may not even be able to get a builder unless you've got the internal elevations. But you know what? When you're

handing over the floor plans and the internal elevations to your builder, that's really enabling him or her to do a fixed price quote because they can see what you want.

They know it's a 20 mil bench top rather than a 60 or making an assumption that, oh, maybe it's gonna be six mil bench top. They can very, ... Sorry. They can much more easily create a fixed price quote than if they don't have the internal elevations. So there's an additional benefit. You will get the fixed price quote over not having them, and then it's just make this assumption everything will be prime cost, and that's gonna be tricky as well.

And also cost you money down the track, too, because you'll have more variations. All right. That's it from me this month. I will see you next month. Bye for now.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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