

RENOVATION REALITY CHECK

What I wish every homeowner knew before building

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for R.Studio Architects



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INTRO

If you're reading this, you're probably excited... and slightly terrified.

Building or renovating is one of the biggest financial and emotional commitments you'll ever make. And the truth is — most problems I see on site don't happen because people are careless. They happen because no one explained things clearly upfront.

This guide is not about perfect design or glossy Pinterest homes. It's about helping you avoid expensive mistakes, ask better questions, and feel more confident before you start. I've written this guide for people who want to make informed decisions — without feeling overwhelmed.

Think of this as the conversation you'd have with an architect friend over coffee — honest, practical, and very real.

— Rochelle

THE BIGGEST (AND MOST EXPENSIVE) MISTAKES I SEE

Most issues I deal with on site could have been avoided with clearer decisions upfront.

- **Starting before drawings are complete**

This usually leads to confusion, rework, and rushed decisions on site.

- **Appointing a contractor too early**

Without a clear scope, it's almost impossible to compare quotes properly.

- **Underestimating emotional strain**

Building is exciting — but it can also be exhausting if expectations aren't managed.

- **Relying on verbal agreements**

If it's not written down, it's open to interpretation.

- **Paying ahead of progress**

Once money is paid, leverage is lost.

Hard truth:

The cheaper route upfront often becomes the most expensive one later.

I often meet clients once construction has already started — and by then, the options are limited and costly.

WHAT DOES BUILDING REALLY COST RIGHT NOW?

There is no single “correct” rate, but there are realistic ranges.

Instead of exact numbers (which don't exist), here are honest ranges:

- **Basic renovations:** ± R8,000 – R12,000 / m²

Straightforward changes, limited structural work, standard finishes.

- **Mid-range renovations:** ± R12,000 – R18,000 / m²

Structural changes, upgraded kitchens/bathrooms, better detailing.

- **High-end renovations:** R20,000+ / m²

Bespoke finishes, complex detailing, specialist trades.

- **New builds:** Often similar, sometimes higher once finishes are included.

These ranges are not guarantees — they're guides. Your project may fall outside them depending on complexity, timing, and decisions made along the way.

These numbers change constantly — but if your quote is far below these ranges, it's worth asking why.

If a quote seems unusually low, ask what is not included — not just what is.

THE 6 STANDARD ARCHITECTURAL STAGES

How a Typical Architectural Project Unfolds

Most projects move through a series of defined stages. Understanding these early helps avoid frustration later.

1. Brief & Feasibility

- Understanding needs, site constraints, and budget
- Testing what is realistically possible

2. Concept Design

- Overall layout, massing, and design intent
- Early cost alignment

3. Design Development

- Refining plans and key decisions
- Coordination with consultants

4. Technical Documentation

- Detailed drawings for approval and construction
- Used for accurate pricing

5. Construction

- Building on site
- Ongoing coordination and decision-making

6. Close-Out

- Practical completion, snags, and finalisation

TIMELINE + CASH FLOW

When Time and Money Are Typically Required

One of the biggest surprises for clients is when costs arise – not just how much.

Typical Timeframes (very approximate)

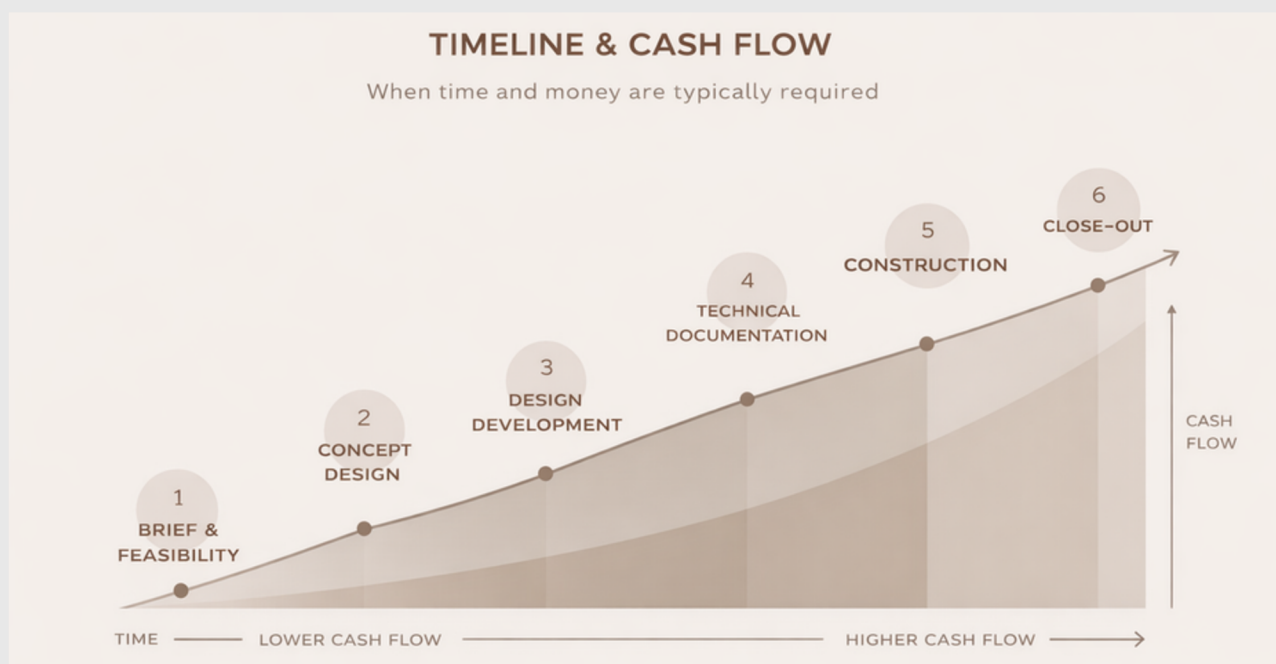
- Early stages: slower, more decision-based
- Construction: faster, more cost-intensive

Typical Cost Flow (illustrative, not contractual)

- Early design stages: lower, spread out
- Documentation: moderate
- Construction: bulk of project cost

Final stages: retention + close-out costs

Every project is different. These are not fixed rules – they're intended to help with planning and expectation-setting.



CHOOSING A CONTRACTOR

A good contractor can make the process manageable. The wrong one can make it unbearable.

Ask them:

Don't be afraid to ask these questions more than once – clarity now avoids conflict later.

- Who will be on site daily, and who do I speak to when there's a problem?
- How do you handle delays or changes?
- How are variations priced and approved?
- Can I speak to clients from the last 6–12 months?

Red flags:

- Vague answers often lead to vague accountability later.
- Pressure to make quick decisions before you're ready.

PAYMENT STRUCTURES THAT PROTECT YOU

Money is often the most uncomfortable topic — but it's also the most important.

- Payments should be linked to visible progress
- Avoid large deposits unless clearly justified
- Retention protects both parties
- Variations must be agreed before work continues

If payment schedules feel confusing, that's usually a sign they need to be simplified.

A simple rule:

Never be ahead of the work.

TYPES OF CONTRACTS TO CONSIDER

The type of contract you use sets the tone for the entire build. It affects risk, payment, accountability, and how disputes are handled.

JBCC (Joint Building Contracts Committee)

(Common in South Africa)

- A standard, widely recognised building contract
- Clear rules around payments, delays, variations, and defects
- Balanced – protects both client and contractor when administered correctly

Best suited for:

Medium to large projects, or any build where clarity and structure are important.

JBCC contracts work best when someone experienced is involved in administering them.

Principal Building Agreement (PBA)

(Often used for residential projects)

- Simpler than JBCC
- Still offers a formal structure
- Fewer mechanisms, but easier to understand

Best suited for:

Straightforward residential builds with a clearly defined scope.

TYPES OF CONTRACTS TO CONSIDER, CONTINUED

Cost-Plus Agreements

- You pay the actual cost of construction plus a contractor's fee
- Offers flexibility
- Requires high trust and clear reporting

Be cautious:

Without strict controls, costs can escalate quickly.

Simple or “Informal” Agreements

- Often based on emails, WhatsApps, or basic quotes
- Little protection if things go wrong

Hard truth: If it's not written into a contract, it's difficult to enforce later.

If you're unsure which contract is appropriate, this is a very good moment to get professional advice before signing anything.

PRACTICAL COMPLETION

This is one of the most misunderstood stages of a build. This is a milestone, not the finish line.

It does not mean:

- Everything is perfect
- All defects are fixed

It does mean:

- The house is safe and usable
- Snags are recorded
- Final payments are carefully managed

Rushing this stage often creates long-term frustration.

WHERE SPENDING MORE ACTUALLY SAVES MONEY

Some decisions are worth getting right the first time.

Spend properly on:

- Waterproofing (repairs are invasive)
- Windows & doors (performance matters)
- Structural work (difficult to redo)
- Good contractors

Be cautious with:

- Trendy finishes
- Imported fittings with long lead times
- Last-minute design changes

ARE YOU READY TO BUILD? (QUICK CHECKLIST)

This isn't about being perfect — it's about being prepared.

- ✓ Drawings are complete
- ✓ Budget includes a contingency
- ✓ You know who makes decisions
- ✓ You understand the contract
- ✓ You've asked the uncomfortable questions

If you're unsure about more than one item, it's worth pausing and getting advice.

PROJECT START / CONSTRUCTION KICK-OFF CHECKLIST

Before construction starts on site, these items should be clearly agreed and understood by everyone involved.

Documentation

- ☐ Final drawings issued
- ☐ Contract signed by all parties
- ☐ Payment schedule agreed
- ☐ Scope of work clearly defined
- ☐ Variations process understood

Financial

- ☐ Budget includes a contingency
- ☐ Insurances in place
- ☐ Retention agreed
- ☐ Allowances clearly identified

Roles & Communication

- ☐ Who represents the client
- ☐ Who makes final decisions
- ☐ Who communicates with the contractor
- ☐ How often site meetings will happen

Site & Practical Matters

- ☐ Access arrangements confirmed
- ☐ Site establishment agreed
- ☐ Programme discussed
- ☐ Neighbours informed (where relevant)

Starting without clarity here often leads to stress later – even on well-designed projects.

FINAL NOTE

There is no such thing as a stress-free build — but there is such a thing as a well-informed one.

If you feel unsure, confused, or overwhelmed, that's normal. It's also the best moment to ask for advice — before the money is spent.

If you'd like to talk through your specific project, I offer a 90-minute consult (online or in person) where we go through your plans, budget, and concerns — calmly and honestly.

This is not a full architectural appointment, just clarity when you need it most.

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