

MODERN GREEN HOMES

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RENOVATION &
RETROFIT SPECIAL

Garage converted to cosy retreat; two rental home upgrades;
slow architecture for a fast world; choosing your block & more

SECOND LIFE

Eco homes
without starting over

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Wilam Ngarrang

Apartment block retrofit
ticks all the boxes for tenants



Landing well

Planning your dream home? Choosing the right block of land is a key early decision, writes Tassie building designer Jane Hilliard.



The piece of land you choose to build on has a huge impact on your project outcome. Choosing an appropriate block is the very first big decision to get right, as it can set you up for success and a realised dream, or years of struggle and a blown-out budget. This single decision can steer your project in a smooth and satisfying or challenging and expensive direction. The good news is that when you know what to take into consideration, it needn't be a daunting process.

The first step is getting clear on your ideal lifestyle, aligned with your values and reflecting your financial, energy, and time capacities. Comfort, convenience, access to services, aesthetics, the surrounding environment, and opportunity to pursue activities and hobbies all come into play. Blocks of land you consider should support this lifestyle, as most people are really craving a 'dream lifestyle' rather than a 'dream home'.

PAYING RESPECT TO COUNTRY

When you purchase a block of land, you become its caretaker. It is important to find out who lived there before you and understand its history – how did First Nations people live in and move around the area, and what foods were abundant seasonally? And how has it been used more recently? Honouring the land and those who came before, while investing in it for future inhabitants, can strengthen your connection with the land.

Left Just about every block of land will involve weighing up desirable features with limitations. This one, on the Tasman Peninsula, offered amazing views and a great north-facing orientation, but had a long, steep driveway – something the purchasers decided they could live with. Image: Rose Kelly



Above A simple blank canvas of a block can be a great starting point for creating your own sanctuary. These Homeful clients chose a modest-sized ‘shack suburb’ block near the coast in Greens Beach, north-east Tasmania, for their little holiday home. Backing onto bushland, it’s north-facing, flat, and has easy access – all valuable features. It was fully cleared, but has now been revegetated with native plantings for privacy and softness. Images: Rosie Shield

TOP CONSIDERATIONS WHEN BUYING LAND

Your block of land and its characteristics will greatly affect your build project cost and how you will live in the finished home. For example, difficult features like a steep slope or a long driveway can dramatically increase building costs, while a lack of northern sun can increase heating costs and reduce comfort and productivity.

Make sure you consider these:

- **Location:** Make sure it supports your ideal lifestyle, including travel needs and access to services.
- **Size:** Needs to be realistic for your energy levels and lifestyle, as land requires maintenance.
- **Orientation:** Consider access to sun for optimal passive solar design.
- **Slope:** Not too steep (aim for flat to moderate) for ease of construction, servicing, and living.
- **Access:** Look for an existing access road or driveway, or the possibility of installing one that is not too long or steep.
- **Services:** You’ll need mains connections or off-grid provision for electricity, water, sewage treatment, and stormwater.
- **Zoning:** Appropriate zoning (ideally residential) allows for streamlined planning approval.

- **Overlays:** Be aware that planning scheme overlays can add complexity, cost, and reporting requirements.
- **Vegetation:** House sites that are already cleared can help reduce bushfire risk, construction costs, and the impact of your build on native habitat.

Cheaper blocks might look like a great deal, but often present challenges like difficult access or heavy vegetation that can end up costing significantly extra during construction. It’s essential to budget for these factors if, after carefully weighing up all considerations, you decide to buy the block.

HOW DO THESE FACTORS AFFECT COSTS AND LIFESTYLE?

Location

The location must align with your values and priorities. For example, a rural block may not support priorities of reducing car use and being close to family. If you plan to grow food, consider the climate, soil profile, rainfall, and microclimate. Assess how the location would affect your lifestyle, environmental impact, access to services and community, and travel distances.

Size

The property size determines the time and energy required for caretaking, including gardening, clearing for bushfire protection, and native habitat care. Larger blocks can involve higher initial costs for installing services and access. Consider what you want to do on the land, your time and energy capacities, and the minimum space required for a comfortable, values-aligned life. You may be surprised how productive a compact parcel of land can be!

Orientation

A block with good northern sun exposure allows you to embrace passive solar design. If true north is not possible, north-east is the next best, to capture morning sun. A lack of northern sun increases heating costs, while excessive western exposure tends to increase summer cooling costs due to intense and low-level afternoon sun.

Slope

Slopes greater than 20 per cent (11 degrees) add significant costs to construction, driveways, and servicing.

Steep sites require more complex footings and foundations, expensive retaining walls, and increased labour, leading to a large chunk of the budget being consumed by site works. Living on a slope also presents challenges for moving around the site, connecting indoor and outdoor spaces, and gardening, and can lead to drainage issues. While steep sites may offer views or a lower initial price, the steeper the slope, the more your building will cost. It's a good idea to assess the slope in person, as real estate agent definitions of 'moderate slope' can be misleading.

Access

All homes need approved access. Driveways are expensive, so a shorter and simpler one saves budget for the house. Steeper driveways can have stringent surface requirements, potentially concrete, which is expensive and high in embodied energy. Bushfire compliance rules may also affect access design. Finding a block with an existing crossover from the road and ideally also a driveway is a bonus.

Below A sloped site and dense vegetation aren't necessarily dealbreakers, but will add complexity and cost to your design and build. This home in the Huon Valley was built along the slope, with the long side facing north for passive solar gain. It's elevated on tall piles, and a flat, cleared terrace was excavated next to the house for bushfire protection and to create connection to the site. Images: Rosie Shield (left), Natalie Mendham (right)





Service connections

Dwellings require sewerage, stormwater, electricity, and reticulated water, either from mains infrastructure or as self-contained, off-grid systems. Make sure you are aware of what the block offers in terms of services, and be aware that new connections to mains services or installing your own off-grid services onsite will attract additional – likely significant – costs.

Zoning

All land in Australia is zoned (for example, residential and agricultural). The zoning rules dictate what the land can be used for and what can be built on it. Using land in alignment with its zoning is ideal; residential zoning means your planning approval for a house will likely be straightforward. Trying to put a residential house on agricultural land, though, will probably involve a more challenging and costly approval process and there is a chance it won't be approved.

Overlays

Overlays necessitate additional reporting to ensure development does not adversely affect the site's natural values or special characteristics. Common overlays include bushfire risk, environmental protection, landslide risk, and flooding risk. Though not necessarily deal-breakers, they add cost to the pre-construction, approvals, and potentially construction stages. Getting detailed site assessments early on is wise for these blocks.

Vegetation

Heavy vegetation adds to construction costs because some clearing is generally required for bushfire protection; this also impacts native habitat and risks damaging topsoil. Look for blocks with already cleared or partly cleared building sites. Choosing cleared land is also a more responsible approach given declining native habitat, and you can always revegetate later. Cleared land is also better for productive food gardens due to lack of shading.

ONE MORE IMPORTANT THING: DUE DILIGENCE

Due diligence is very important before purchasing property. Basically, it means taking the responsibility to find out exactly what you are buying so you don't get yourself into a tricky situation! Many factors that affect what you can and can't build, and how much it will cost, are not evident on inspection or likely to be disclosed by real estate agents. We recommend you seek professional advice from your local council, a private planner, a conveyancer, or a property lawyer for assistance with understanding and/or undertaking due diligence.

IN SUMMARY

Consider spending more initially for a block suitable for your specific needs, lifestyle, and project budget. While the land may cost more, this extra expenditure will most likely save you money, time, and energy during the design and building process. Ultimately, a block of land that aligns with your values and ideal lifestyle will set you up to fulfil your dreams. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Hilliard is the founding director of design practice Homeful. Her aim is to make good design available to more people while embracing 'enoughness'. She loves to ask clients: what do you need to support a healthy and happy life? And, what can be removed to make space for the meaningful?

homefulbydesignful.com.au

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Jane and her team have produced a comprehensive guide to finding a block of land, plus a detailed checklist to help you through the process. It's available to purchase from the Homeful website shop: homefulbydesignful.com.au/shop

Left A desire to live closer to nature was behind former Brisbanites Bronwyn and Brad's decision to buy their four-hectare block under Quamby Bluff in Tasmania's Golden Valley. Although it's only 12 kilometres from the major country town of Deloraine, there were no mains services to the property, and the couple had to factor in the cost of an off-grid solar PV system and batteries, 20,000 litres of rainwater storage, and onsite wastewater treatment. Read the full story in *Sanctuary* 55. Image: Chris Crerar