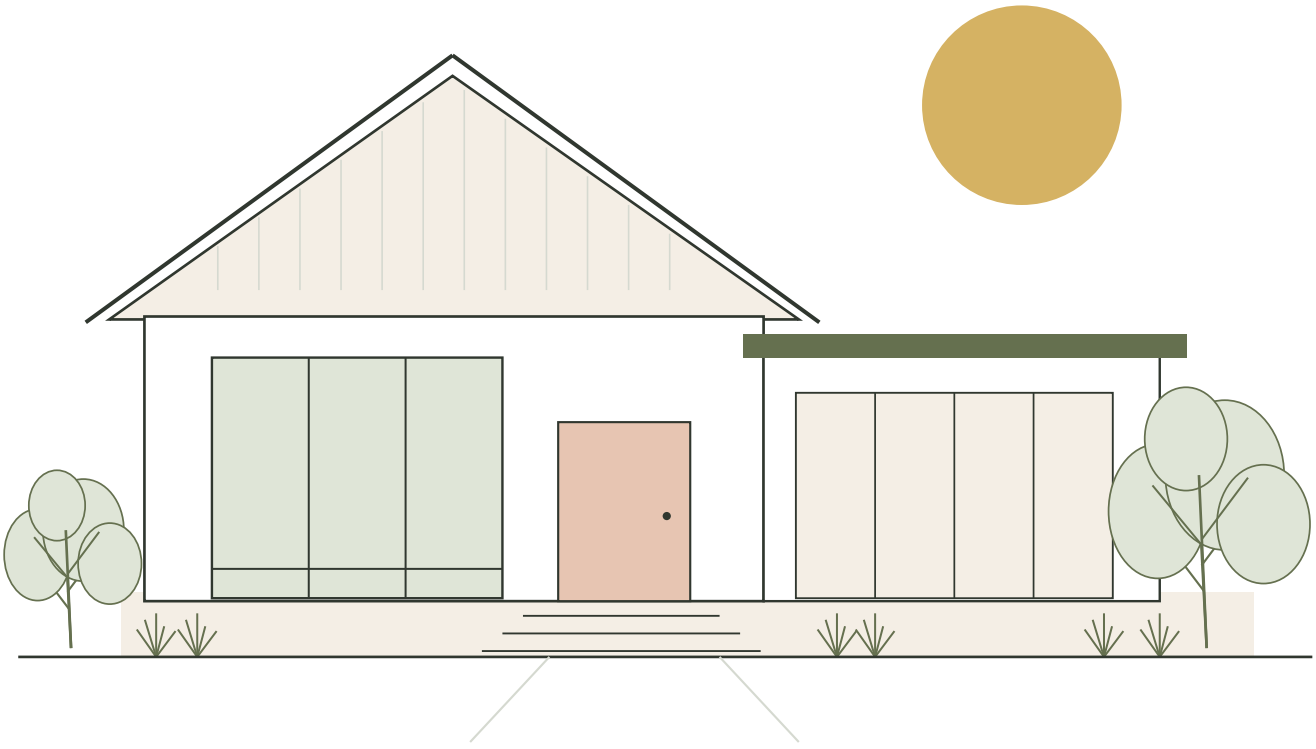
The Dream Home Starter Guide

Where beautiful ideas become healthy, sustainable homes.

A calm, practical starting point for your custom home, renovation or extension.



PLAN WITH CLARITY. DESIGN WITH INTENTION.

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

A clearer place to begin.

You do not need to have everything figured out. This guide helps you turn scattered ideas into a clear starting point for a conversation with your architect.

EIGHT THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE DESIGN BEGINS

01 **Your everyday life**
Start with how your family wants to live.

02 **Your site**
Notice its opportunities and constraints.

03 **Your budget**
Allow for the whole project.

04 **Your approvals**
Check the likely pathway early.

05 **Your team**
Bring in the right expertise.

06 **A healthier home**
Build comfort into the design.

07 **Your brief**
Separate essentials from possibilities.

08 **Early mistakes**
Make better decisions from the start.

MAKE IT YOURS

Read through once, then return with a pen. Use the notes pages to capture your priorities, questions and next steps.

Finish with your project checklist on page 11 and a clear next step on page 12.

Begin with the way you want to live.

Before floor plans, finishes or inspiration images, start with real life.

IMAGINE A DAY IN YOUR FUTURE HOME

1

Morning

Easy routines

Where do bags, shoes and breakfast happen?

2

Daytime

Space to focus

How can work, play and quiet time coexist?

3

Evening

Room to connect

How do cooking, gathering and outdoor living connect?

4

Over time

Room to change

What might your family need in five or ten years?

YOUR NOTES

What frustrates you about your current home?

Where do you need more light, airflow, storage or privacy?

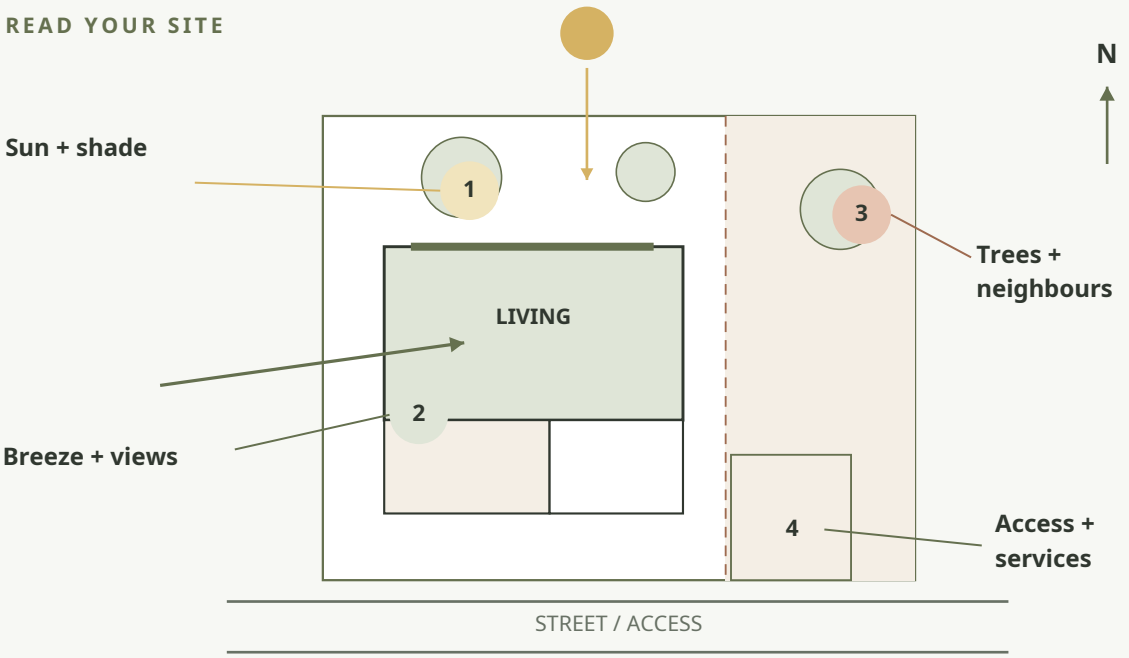
What would make everyday life feel calmer and more enjoyable?

Try this: write a short "day in the life" story. Include busy mornings, working from home, entertaining, quiet time and weekends in the garden.

Let the site shape the home.

Light, outlook, breeze, garden and privacy are part of the brief from day one.

READ YOUR SITE



Illustrative site diagram only. Locate true north, boundaries and constraints from site information.

Sun, breeze + outlook

Orientation, useful light, shade, privacy and neighbouring buildings.

Land + landscape

Slope, levels, trees, vegetation and existing structures.

Access + infrastructure

Parking, driveways, drainage, easements and underground services.

Planning + hazards

Council controls; bushfire, flood, heritage or coastal constraints.

GATHER WHAT YOU HAVE

Survey, existing plans, sewer or drainage diagrams, planning certificates, past approvals and relevant council or consultant correspondence.

Budget for the whole project.

A construction allowance is one part of the total. Set clear boundaries early.

THE PIECES OF YOUR TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET

01

Construction

Building work, specified finishes and fixtures.

02

Design + consultants

Architecture, engineering and specialist advice.

03

Investigations + approvals

Survey, site reports, council, certifier and authority fees.

04

External works

Landscaping, drainage, driveway and site works.

05

Moving + setting up

Temporary accommodation, furniture, window coverings and appliances.

06

Contingency

A separate allowance for project uncertainties.

YOUR TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET

Categories are a checklist, not cost proportions. Check what is already included in quotes so allowances are not counted twice.

SET YOUR BOUNDARIES

Comfortable total budget

$ _____

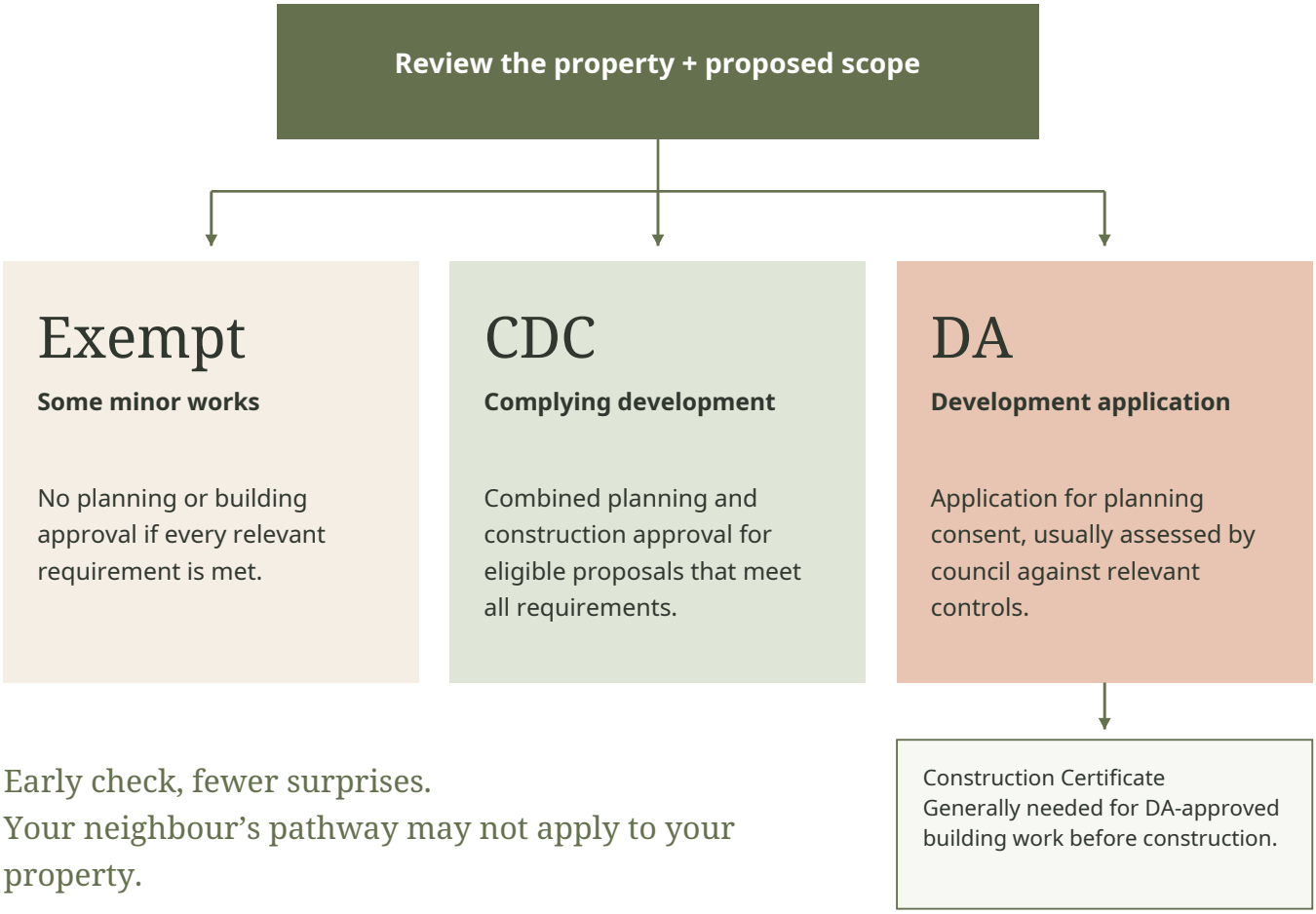
Absolute upper limit

$ _____

Which features are essential? What finish level do you want? What could be staged later?

Check the pathway before you commit.

The site and proposed work determine which approval route can be used.



Early check, fewer surprises.
Your neighbour's pathway may not apply to your property.

OTHER APPROVALS MAY STILL APPLY

Check plumbing and drainage, trees, driveway access, stormwater, heritage, bushfire, flood and coastal matters, and any subdivision or boundary issues.

Confirm eligibility, approval conditions and all pre-start requirements with your project team and relevant authority. This diagram is a starting point, not a site-specific approval assessment.

NSW Planning: approval pathways

Planning Portal: post-consent certificates

The right people, at the right time.

Your architect can help identify who is needed, when to engage them and what information they should provide.

BUILD A TEAM AROUND THE PROJECT

1

Understand the site

Registered surveyor / town planner / geotechnical engineer / bushfire consultant

Clarify boundaries, ground conditions and project constraints.

2

Resolve the design

Architect / structural engineer / stormwater or civil engineer / energy assessor

Coordinate the home, structure, services and performance.

3

Shape the experience

Landscape designer / interior designer

Connect indoor and outdoor spaces, materials and everyday use.

4

Test costs + deliver

Quantity surveyor / builder / certifier

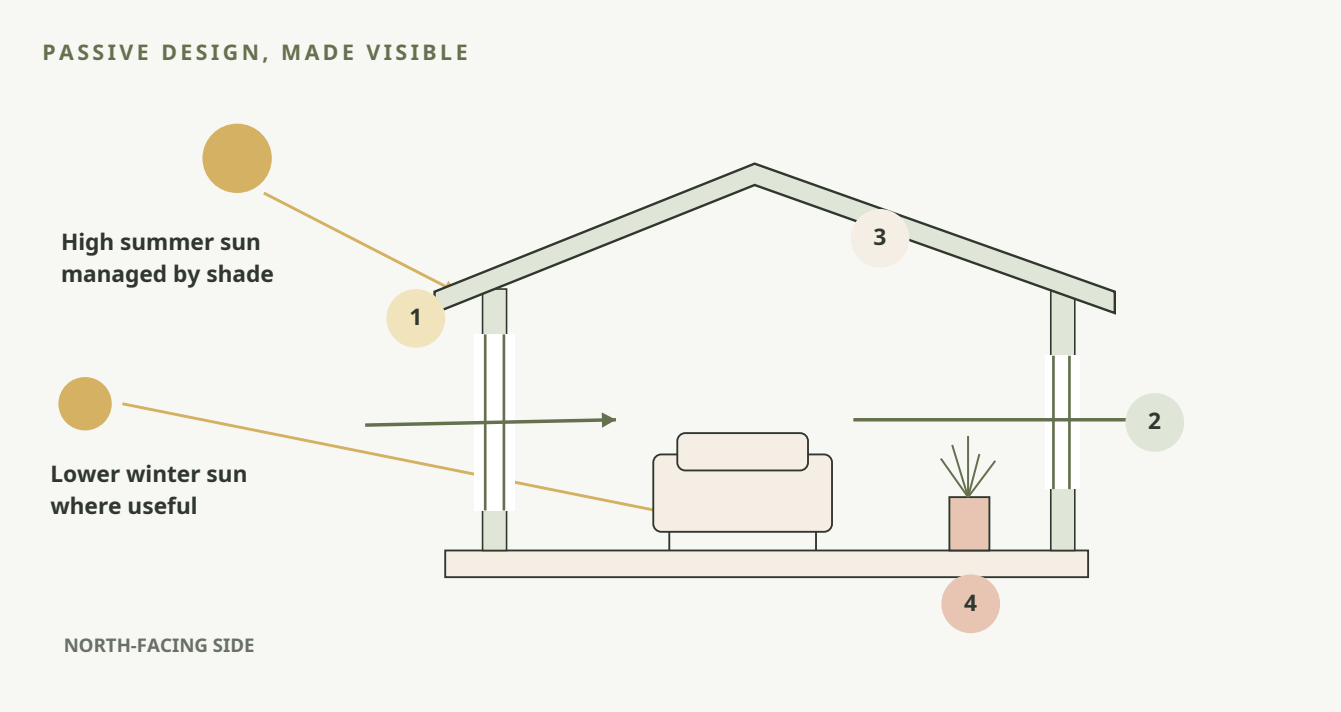
Provide cost, construction and certification input within their respective roles.

ASK AT YOUR FIRST MEETING

Which consultants are essential now? What do they need to produce? Which appointments can wait until the design is clearer?

Make comfort part of the architecture.

Natural light, fresh air, shade and a connection to nature belong in the first sketch.



Conceptual section only. Orientation, shading and ventilation need to suit the site and climate.

1 Light + shade

Plan useful daylight and appropriate shading, including east and west windows.

2 Air + comfort

Create effective ventilation paths and quieter spaces for rest.

3 A better envelope

Coordinate insulation, glazing and draught control for thermal comfort.

4 Nature + materials

Connect to the garden; choose durable, low-maintenance and low-toxicity finishes.

Also plan for efficient water and energy use, and flexible rooms that can adapt with your family.

Further reading: Your Home / passive design + orientation

Turn your ideas into a clear brief.

An honest, practical and prioritised brief is more useful than a long wish list.

CAPTURE THE ESSENTIALS

Who will live here?

Include family, visitors and future needs.

Which spaces do you need?

Note how rooms should connect.

What atmosphere do you love?

Choose a few images and explain why.

What are the boundaries?

Record budget, timeframe and priorities.

SORT YOUR IDEAS INTO THREE GROUPS

Must have	Would love	Future possibility
The essentials the project cannot succeed without.	Include if space and budget allow.	Plan now; potentially complete later.

Bring this page to your first consultation. The priorities you record here become a reference point as the design develops.

A little preparation. Fewer surprises.

Use these checks to protect your time, budget and design intent.

COMMON EARLY MISTAKE		A BETTER STARTING POINT
Designing before understanding the site.	→	Review constraints, opportunities and the approval route first.
Budgeting for construction alone.	→	Allow for fees, external works, set-up costs and contingency.
Choosing a builder on price alone.	→	Compare scope, experience, communication and inclusions.
Repeatedly changing the brief.	→	Agree priorities and understand the effect of each change.
Selecting finishes too early.	→	Resolve layout, light, levels and spatial relationships first.
Underestimating drainage and landscaping.	→	Include external works in design and cost discussions.
Designing mainly for resale.	→	Balance long-term value with how your household will live.
Rushing into detailed drawings.	→	Confirm the approval strategy and required consultant input.
Leaving key questions until later.	→	Discuss budget, programme and appointments from the outset.

Good design begins with thoughtful decisions about what matters most.

Ready for your first conversation?

Use this page to gather what you know and highlight what you need help with.

- [ ] Write down your goals and priorities.
- [ ] Set an initial total project budget.
- [ ] Gather the property information you have.
- [ ] Locate existing plans and past approvals.
- [ ] Arrange a current site survey if needed.
- [ ] Collect a small selection of inspiration images.
- [ ] Identify your preferred timeframe.
- [ ] List must-haves, would-loves and future possibilities.
- [ ] Note concerns about slope, trees, drainage, hazards or privacy.
- [ ] Book an initial architectural consultation.

THREE QUESTIONS TO BRING

01

02

03

You can begin with incomplete information. Your first meeting can help identify the gaps.

Let’s bring your ideas into focus.

Residential Studio designs thoughtful, healthy and sustainable family homes. We can help you understand your site, clarify the likely approval pathway and establish the next steps before you commit to a full design process.

START YOUR PROJECT

Tell us about your property, ideas, budget and timeframe.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR PROJECT

KEEP EVERYTHING IN ONE CALM PLACE

Use the Client Project Dashboard Template to organise your notes, files, decisions and tasks. Duplicate the template into your own Notion workspace and add information as you find it.

Open the Client Project Dashboard Template

CONTINUE THE GUIDE SERIES

02 / The Design & Approval Roadmap

Explore the design process, approval pathways and key decisions as your project progresses.

Read the next guide

residentialstudio.com.au Healthy. Sustainable. Considered.