



Looking to turn a village house into your dream home? Beware the hidden costs, writes
Peta Tomlinson

Floored beauties

Village houses: dream homes or money pits? There's a certain allure to the idea of heading to pastures greener, where the air is cleaner, more space is available and, at least until recent times, prices are cheaper.

But bargains aren't always what they seem. Architects who specialise in village house renovations say there are almost always structural problems that need to be fixed before reaching the fun part of interior design. They don't say don't do it, just approach a makeover with your eyes and cheekbook wide open – ideally before you sign the contract to buy that New Territories house of your dreams.

Adrian McCarroll of Original Vision says older village houses, those built in the 1970s and 80s, can be problematic because of poor construction quality. Since the 90s, materials and building techniques have improved, he says.

"Older houses tend to be of column and beam construction, with the possibility of internal columns, which results in a compromised layout and reduced bedroom," McCarroll says. "More recently, the practice has been to leave village houses column-free, with a thicker floor slab. This gives architects a better chance of achieving a decent layout."

"The flip side to newer houses is that, because the external walls are structural, windows are often made too small to allow in much natural light, and there is never enough access to the outside. Both of these problems can be resolved, but the cost needs to be considered."

Village houses do tend to leak, McCarroll says. "In almost every single village house we replace the roof, regardless," he says. "Even if it's not leaking now, it's going to eventually." They're also never insulated, so replacing the roof provides an opportunity to add this energy-saving feature.

Leaky walls are another common problem, because of the porosity of the old brick infill. The solution is to strip all external walls bare and add a waterproof membrane. "We tend to replace the windows wherever possible, and put in double glazing if the budget allows for sound and thermal insulation, and to help prevent condensation."

McCarroll advises factoring in the cost of replacing the plumbing, drainage and power. He says it's a false economy to skip on these when village house infrastructure was never meant for today's energy-hungry households. (The power supply itself may need to be upgraded and that's not always possible, depending on the village: CLP Power can advise.)

Staircases are often in odd positions that don't allow for an economic layout. "It's the first thing we look at in terms of design," McCarroll says. Moving a staircase is costly, but if you don't it could scupper the whole aesthetic.

Besides, who wants chunky old concrete stairs in their living room?

Edward Bilson of MAP

Architecture and Planning agrees that staircases are the biggest design problem with village houses, and the single biggest value-add of any renovation project. But that's only the start, he says. Next come new bathrooms and kitchen, realigned bedrooms, new walls and some new external windows. Bilson says a full renovation of 2,100 sq ft can cost between HK\$2 million and HK\$4 million. He says to allow for HK\$3 million "for a comprehensive renovation of middle quality."

Do-it-yourselfers might expect to pay less. Sai Kung resident Chan Keng-siew had a limited budget, so she hired architects on a freelance basis and did some of the design work herself – not always successfully. "I wish they'd made more suggestions because I'm not a designer and I didn't always come up with the best use of space," she says. Chan paid her contractor about HK\$500,000 to revamp two floors (1,200 sq ft). Fittings, such as tiles, wood flooring and kitchen appliances, were extra.

The project took six months. Because the contractor was busy with other jobs, he sometimes only had one workman on site at a time. The verdict? "It was a huge headache and I will never do it again," says Chan, who lived onsite while the work was taking place. "But I do now have a home I love."

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Adrian McCarroll, architect

Bilson stresses the importance of spatial planning. "A HK\$1.5 million budget may not stretch to stair relocation but this points to the biggest problem with village houses, which is the planning of the house and its relationship to the external areas and amenity," he says. "You buy a village house because you want to have less density and more outdoor living."

If you have a garden, even a small one, you'll want to use it or at least see it. By replacing expanses of ground-floor external walls with folding or sliding glass doors, the exteriority of the garden becomes the boundary. When you only have 700 sq ft inside to play with – the maximum footprint of most village houses, which are two or three storeys high – every bit matters.

Covered outdoor space is the other big value add, Bilson says. It increases the feeling of space and can create the illusion of a ground floor area that is twice the size. "Covered pergolas can be approved under the terms of a Short Term Tenancy by the Lands Department through the new STT self-assessment system, and if you are building over "in-deed" land, then it is less of an issue for the department," he says.

There's a lot of living to be squeezed into 700 sq ft per floor, but architects have solutions. "Owners

should start with a detailed planning analysis of the opportunities presented by the site and the orientation of the house structure," Bilson says. "The rest of the issues will all shake out as a result of optimising the planning response."

One couple who have done it twice concur that design magic can happen when an architect is given free rein. At their first house of 2,400 sq ft in Pak Sha Wan, the L-shape construction with six half-floors and a central staircase "allowed us to develop some really interesting spaces." Rooms were opened up to create a combined kitchen/dining area with a folding glass partition. The double height lounge provided scope for a mezzanine gallery and study area. The steep garden "wasn't much use," but became so with the addition of a timber deck extending to the perimeter wall, with a small swimming pool in the middle. They sold it for "a substantial profit."

Their second and current home, in Ngau Liu near Sai Kung, also required a full makeover. Ground-floor walls were removed to open up the space, with a piano recess created in a staircase nook. Upstairs, bedroom numbers were reduced to provide more spacious rooms. A glass partition in the master bedroom and bathroom allows sweeping valley views.

But the garden is the reason why this couple love their village home. Large by Hong Kong standards at 4,300 sq ft, it has a patio with dining area and sofas, a covered outdoor kitchen/barbecue and a swimming pool.

His advice to those looking to renovate a village house is to engage a project manager. A contract with the builder is essential and should include a day work schedule stipulating agreed costs – for instance, how much per square metre to replace a wall. This clarifies costs when, inevitably, you want to make design changes.

The owner is a project manager by profession – so he saved money by managing the works. The renovation for both homes cost a little over HK\$2 million each, including the pools and his architect's fee of about 15 per cent of the total price. Contrast this with neighbours who became so frustrated with the cost blowout and poor standard that they now rent it out, too disinclined to live there.

"They fell out with the builder over late completion, costs and quality," he says. "They also failed to top-seal the defects liability clause, which allows you to withhold payment on any works if it is not to an acceptable standard. If you get the wrong builder or fall out with him you will be in trouble. Recommendations are important."

He also stresses the necessity of having a penalty for late completion. "Many builders will try to avoid these clauses (which are normal in major construction projects) – called Liquidated Damages Clauses – whereby you can deduct, say, HK\$2,000 a day for late completion against the original programme."

"Without this clause you are at the mercy of a builder who can save money by putting only one track at a time on the project, which is more cost-efficient for him but very slow," he says.

Weighing up the cost

Estimates of works typical in a renovation of a village house:

Replacing the staircase At a village house in Sheung Yung, Original Vision replaced a chunky, crooked staircase that was "jerky-built" 25 years ago with open-tread timber stairs that are now a focal point of the room. Cost: HK\$25,000
Low ceilings At one home in Clear Water Bay, Original Vision took away half of the ground-floor ceiling. The resulting atrium lobby created a feeling of spaciousness. Cost: the cost here is giving away floor area.
Leaky roof and walls Replacing the roof on a village house involves stripping off the roof finish to bare concrete and adding insulation, waterproofing and a new finish on top of the existing structure. Cost: HK\$20,000.
Inadequate windows Replace windows, ideally with high-quality powder-coated aluminium frames with double glazing, and install exterior opening doors on the ground floor. Cost: HK\$350,000
Building infrastructure Be prepared to replace the plumbing, drainage and electrics. Cost: HK\$250,000

Approximate costings provided by Original Vision, 22/7, 88 Gloucester Road, Wai Chai, www.original-vision.com



Inside-outside living at Edward Bilson's village house in Sai Kung (top, bottom left); Adrian McCarroll shows the potential of open-plan living (left); Chan Keng-siew's living room (below). Photo below: John Butler; other photos courtesy of Original Vision, MAP Architecture and Planning

