



## Seven Lessons Learned from Recent Homebuyers, Architects and Builders



How do you reach homebuilding nirvana, like this family? With these lessons learned from recent homebuyers and tips from architects and builders.

*[By Ana Connery](#)*

Hey, nobody's perfect, but if you could avoid the common pitfalls that plague new homeowners, wouldn't you jump at the chance?

We asked homeowners, as well as top architects and builders, to dish on

the lessons they've learned during the homebuilding process and some of the mistakes they made — so you don't have to. You're welcome!

### **Lesson 1: Lack of storage.**

While it may be true that the more storage you have, the more stuff you find to fill it with, experts agree you can never have too much of it, especially in a home with kids. Start with the garage. “If you plan to park one or two cars there, then you'll need alternate storage for items that most people stow there, like sports equipment and tools,” says award-winning architect Jason Pearce of the Becker Morgan Group in Salisbury, Md. “You'd be surprised how often this is overlooked.”

In the kitchen, go for a pantry if at all possible. “I find that most people don't want to put food in cabinets.” Make a list of things you would never want to haul up and down from an attic, like holiday dinnerware, then plan for storage for that, too. “I often suggest putting that under an island since you won't need them much throughout the year and pulling them out will require moving around your barstools,” Pearce says.

Consider a home for the bulky vacuum and other cleaning equipment as close to the rooms that will need it as possible, and finally, don't forget outdoor storage for pool toys and sports equipment as well as outdoor furniture cushions. The design and construction phase is the best time to consider this or you might end up retrofitting a sea of shelving and closets later at a higher cost.

### **Lesson 2: Too many unused spaces.**

There was a time when families gathered in “parlors” to listen to the radio and entertain. Then homes ballooned in size and families migrated to family-friendly great rooms that connected living, dining and kitchen spaces. This new normal meant living rooms became little more than dusty gathering spots for formal furniture and Grandma's heirlooms.

“Formal living rooms provide valuable square footage that can be used elsewhere,” says Pearce. “Homeowners should ask themselves where they gather each night and put the square footage there.” At the very least, consider turning these underused spaces into something your family might use, like a library or an extra bedroom. Not only will the latter help with

resale value, it's handy in all kinds of unforeseen scenarios, such as if someone gets sick and needs to stay with you or you have a lot of out-of-town relatives.

Believe it or not, living rooms aren't the only rooms that tend to sit pretty. Formal dining rooms and sitting areas in master bedrooms sometimes don't fit into the homeowners' lifestyle and go unused. "We get some many requests for these and years down the road people tell us they never even sit in that space," Pearce says. Even the space dedicated to soaking or garden tubs might be better off used for closet space or a larger shower. The key is to think of ways to accommodate your daily needs and habits, not something you think you should do.

### **Lesson 3: Cheaping out on efficiency.**

According to all the architects and homebuilders we spoke to, most people try to cut costs here. They figure they can always upgrade to more efficient products later, and even if it's not ideal, it's good enough.

The thing is, later never comes, and things tend to cost more in the long run. "Never eliminate anything that makes a home more efficient — and that includes appliances," Pearce says. Choosing a less expensive roof, windows or less insulation in the house may reduce your upfront costs, but you'll almost certainly have higher energy bills and more repairs and maintenance. In the end, adds Pearce, "a good quality building is what protects your investment."

### **Lesson 4: Not allowing for allowances.**

Before agreeing to what seems like a reasonable line item for fixtures, appliances and lighting, go shopping and see what you like. Most of the time homeowners agree to a cost first and end up having to cough up thousands of [extra dollars to accommodate their tastes later](#). Even if you decide to upgrade anyway, at least you'll know that early on and it's not coming as a shock near the end of the process.

Also, make sure you make your selections and order things early. "Otherwise, if you wait until you're six weeks out, you might learn something is on back order and won't arrive for 12 weeks," says Winter Park, Fla., homebuilder Phil Kean. "That lag in time can end up costing you

more money.”

### **Lesson 5: Planning for today, not tomorrow.**

Chances are if you're building a home from scratch, you're not likely to move anytime soon. Starting with the right architect, contractor or builder and a great custom design results in fewer change orders and better products. [Think about what your needs will be](#) down the road as well as today. Do you hope to have a pool eventually? Get it into the master plan now to ensure you have the right amount of space and location when the time comes. “Another common pitfall is not planning for plumbing or piping in a future bedroom or other added space,” says architect Wayne Visbeen, whose firm has offices in Grand Rapids, Mich., and Chicago.

[The same holds true for electrical needs.](#) “In a landscape, you can put a PVC pipe through the backyard to be able to put down wiring later.” Indoors, a lot of homeowners request second-floor master suites because they tend to be bigger, but then don't consider they may not want to climb stairs as they age. A sizable bedroom downstairs can solve that problem and comes in handy if someone ends up on crutches with a sprained ankle, for example. “You can also plan for an elevator if you're going to want to keep that bedroom upstairs,” Visbeen says.

### **Lesson 6: Being realistic about your outdoor needs.**

Having multiple, ample outdoor spaces has become an absolute must on most homeowners' wish lists, but Visbeen thinks the trend is often disproportionate to reality. “People hang on to the fantasy of how they think they're going to use that space rather than what climate and location will allow,” he says.

Having a lot of outdoor seating areas is also really expensive, adds Nancy Hallberg, who ended up with seven al fresco hot spots when she and her husband built their family's dream home in Wacubuck, N.Y. Porches, for example, are wonderful, but should be deep enough to allow you to sit when it rains and watch the lightning shows. “Otherwise it becomes a walk-through space to dump stuff and that's it,” she says.

### **Lesson 7: Hiring the wrong builder, architect or contractor.**

“Some homeowners have an aversion to hiring a pro to design their home,” Visbeen says. Many opt for less expensive, cookie-cutter plans that won’t allow them to put their own stamp on it. “This is so important because you can build something of great quality, but if it’s not functional for you and the way you live, then it’s not good for you, even if it is well built,” he adds.

Starting with the right architect, contractor or builder and [a great custom design](#) results in fewer change orders and better products, too, since you’re guided by folks who know a heck of a lot more about homebuilding than you do. “Many see something online or in a magazine and ask us to recreate it, but they don’t realize that (the) home is in Minnesota and they live in Florida,” Kean says. “So it won’t work and they don’t take into account how working a natural landscape into the overall design can really impact the way they live.” A great source for quality homebuilders and architects in your area is in local magazines. “See who is getting their work published,” adds Kean.

Homeowners like Hallberg insist that [finding the right contractor](#) is even more important because once you start building, you never know what you’re going to find, but you can always count on something you didn’t expect.

“We tore down a house and found the previous owner had done a lot of illegal things with the electrical work,” she says. “The contractor is also the one there with you day in and day out, so that relationship is so important.”

In the end, hiring the right folks to design and build a home specifically to your needs is a lot like dating — hopefully it leads to a long and beautiful relationship with the home of your dreams.

*Ana Connery is the former content director for the Parenting Group and has edited several magazines, including Florida Travel & Life and Cooking Light, where she oversaw the construction of the FitHouse program. She lives and writes from her Florida bungalow.*