

Ready to design your dream house? Here's how to begin.

Designing a custom home from scratch might feel like a daunting and technical task. But like most big projects, the key to custom home design is knowing where to begin, how to build up your knowledge, and who to turn to when you need expert help. To get you started on that journey, here's a quick guide laying out those first critical tentative steps as you design your dream house.

Before you know it, you'll have focused your vision from a basic house design concept into a clear and practical blueprint.

1. Plan with purpose

So you have a dream to design a custom home. If you're like most people at the beginning of that journey, your mind will be swimming in an ocean of possibilities. What about a home theater? A dual master floor plan? A hobby room, perhaps? There's nothing wrong with having a wish list! In fact, these wonderful options are the reason many people decide to design their dream house to begin with: To have *exactly* what they want. But the sooner you can start building reality into your dream and plan with purpose, the more achievable your custom home design will be.

Of course, you have some very practical considerations to nail down. Here are a few obvious contenders: What size lot are you looking at? What'll your building budget be? How many people will live in your home? Is that number of occupants fixed, or might it grow?

Once you have that planning foundation laid down, you're well-positioned to delve into more gritty and granular questions. Room by hypothetical room, ask yourself what function it will serve, and for whom. This planning with purpose (or "focused dreaming", if that's a more inviting way to put it!) will better position you to separate your tenuous wishes, from your wants, from your absolute necessities.

Oh, and write everything down. Each fixed piece of your plan will make it easier to make tough decisions later on.

2. Think about building materials

The next important step is education — because truly, there's so much to know when it comes to **custom home design**. In particular, it's a great idea to educate yourself on what's going on in the building materials marketplace. You've probably seen news stories about how building materials prices are skyrocketing. The construction industry has been deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with lumber prices hovering at around two-and-a-half times the normal rate in some areas. It goes without saying that these practical pricing considerations will affect your decisions as you set about **designing your dream house** into bricks-and-mortar reality.

Think about where you'll live as well. Live in an area with lots of sun year-round? It might be smart to set your sights on solar energy. Perhaps you're based in a colder area and looking for simple and cost-effective insulation options? You might be well served to spend an evening or two researching structural insulated panels. Your climate, your comfort preferences, your lifestyle — these are all critical variables as you begin the process of focusing your vision into a precise and practical blueprint.

This is also a great time to think about eco-friendly and sustainable building materials. Don't be afraid to think outside the box (or inside it, as the case may be) at this early stage. Here's one example: Shipping container homes have undergone a renaissance in recent years. They offer a fresh new way to **design a custom home** that is at once modern and versatile, yet completely distinctive.

3. Get an expert's perspective

The old adage “two heads are better than one” certainly applies when planning your home. Even if you're brimming with creative ideas, it's smart to seek an expert's viewpoint. Of course, a trained eye can help you avoid obvious mistakes in **custom home design**. But the right expert can also open your eyes to interesting alternatives you may not have even dreamt of.

The conventional wisdom is that you can't plan a home without an architect, a builder, or both. This is an outdated notion. These days, an increasing number of home planners are turning to structural engineers to guide their home planning processes. First off, a structural engineer possesses all the basic practical knowledge required to turn a home idea into a practical blueprint. They can advise on the building code, best construction practice, project management, and the vast array of smaller practical decisions that can make a house feel like a home. But as part and parcel of their trade, an engineer will also be deeply knowledgeable of *materials*: Not just what looks good, but how the right choice of materials (for example, have you ever considered insulated concrete?) can greatly enhance the long-term resilience of your home.

An expert engineer's structurally driven and intensely practical perspective will be vital as you **design your dream home**. Why? Because they're uniquely equipped to keep you grounded.

4. Sketch a floor plan

Either on your own or with the help of an expert, once you have the fundamentals of budget, space, materials, and methods floating in your mind, it's high time to begin sketching out a floor plan. A quick Google search will lead you to any number of free or reasonably priced floor planning tools. (Sketchup is one great alternative with a free basic version.) But you can even do this with graph paper and a sharp pencil if you have a steady hand, some patience, and a pot of coffee on standby.

As you move into this stage of **designing your custom home**, the critical thing to remember is that a draft floor plan is *not* your blueprint. Not yet, anyway. Nothing is set in stone. A floor plan is a way to play with ideas, continually refining your layout until you find something that ... just feels right. Imagine yourself living in your new home, picturing the flow as you walk from room to room. If something feels wrong at this early stage, all you need to fix it is an eraser, or to hit the delete key.

Oh, and as you begin this stage, you'll likely begin to pay deeper attention to how other homes and layouts feel. Our advice is that you embrace that natural urge to compare notes with the architecture around you. Keep an eye out for new inspiration as you ponder the intricacies of **custom home design**, and play with as many ideas as you can.

5. Build the perfect blueprint

Blueprints are the beating heart of any building project. A properly crafted blueprint is key to building a durable, comfortable home. That structural engineer you located back at point 3? It's time to put them to work.

A structural engineer is a perfect choice when designing a blueprint for a **custom home design**. Just as you might gain from a draftsman or architect, a structural engineer has all the requisite skills to draft up a correctly illustrated blueprint. An engineer can ensure you're armed with a fully code-compliant blueprint that gives clear direction to the army of builders and craftspeople who will make your home happen.

But a structural engineer can take your blueprint a step further.

They'll be uniquely qualified to consider the finest nuances of your home's structural integrity, from its foundations to its roof. An architect or draftsman can help you correctly express your design elements, but a structural engineer can introduce that crucial additional skillset of designing a home that'll stand the test of time.

You can design a custom home

Designing your dream house needn't be a pipe dream. You can make it happen if you're willing to plan with purpose, spend a little time building up your knowledge, and find an expert structural engineer who can guide you on your journey from dream to plan to blueprint.

Contact us today if you'd like to learn more about how PSE Consulting Engineers, Inc. can help you transform your dream home into reality.