

Avoiding landscaping pitfalls: your guide to doing it right!

Costly mistake #1

You have to choose to engage a designer from hundreds if not thousands of possible ones available. But let's face it, you are unfamiliar with the activity beyond a surface knowledge. The designer is the one with the experience. Yet you have to make a decision to engage one!

Let me say what is the norm. "He came across as a nice guy" or "a friend (who knows as much as you about landscaping) referred him" or "they have awards" or, and why go on?

This isn't about landscaping only; this is how we operate in life about what we don't know. When I go buy a new car, who do I usually get advice from? The car salesman!

So, is there a better way?

Yes! Having the same amount of knowledge as the person you engage is ludicrous and only someone with control issues would study all there is to know before entrusting someone. But there is knowledge, that if you had it, would enable you to guide & control with confidence. The result would be much greater in terms of possible aesthetic, or budget or time or....lots of ways.

Let me give you the number one mistake I see,

"Mistake #1, Engaging a designer who does not provide what you need"

How can that be I hear you ask? Back to my point above, you have limited knowledge. This is not a zone of activity that is part of your life. Let me give an example:

You engage this nice person and they dresses well, speak well, and their designs look good. You spend time with them, and all goes well. They complete the design and you are happy and because they do not do the actual landscaping, you go look for one yourself. So you meet up with a landscaper to show them your design on your property and ask for a quotation and this is the reply you get:

"So, your design says, 'paving in alfresco', what type of paving is it? To which you reply, "I don't know, don't you recommend that?" Oh boy, and here it goes. "the design says here that you want an open pergola with vine growing over it, what type of timber were you thinking; painted; roofed; style of pergola?" – "well, er, I don't really know, but can you give me a costing?" – You

may be reading this thinking I am being dramatic, I really wish I were! I have been doing this a very long time and can tell you that the majority of designs that come my way in need of a landscaping construction quotation are grossly inadequate to provide a costing.

You see, there is no real standard held to in the industry at this time. A concept Design can be a painting, a 3D plan, a hand drawn design, a CAD design with or without detailing, all are concept designs. So, what is missing? PURPOSE.

There are many wonderful designers that explain thoroughly that their concept design is broken up into parts. The first part is a design more about layout, notes, etc. Then as it is called, design development takes place where plants, materials, and finishes are detailed. Between these two stages is the problem, many designers like doing the first creative part but for various reasons (as will be detailed in my book) they don't follow through with full details. You, with unfamiliarity for the subject matter, don't pick up this until the landscaper asks, "what type of paving is it?"

So, here is my advice:

"Engage a designer to create a fully detailed concept design that has the Purpose of: being able to be quoted from".

There is a little but here – But for the exception where further details are required beyond the scope of a Concept Design, i.e. an engineer needs to specify beam sizes or concrete footing before a cost can be calculated. Where working drawings are required to specify 'how' something is to be built, again only an allowance can be given.

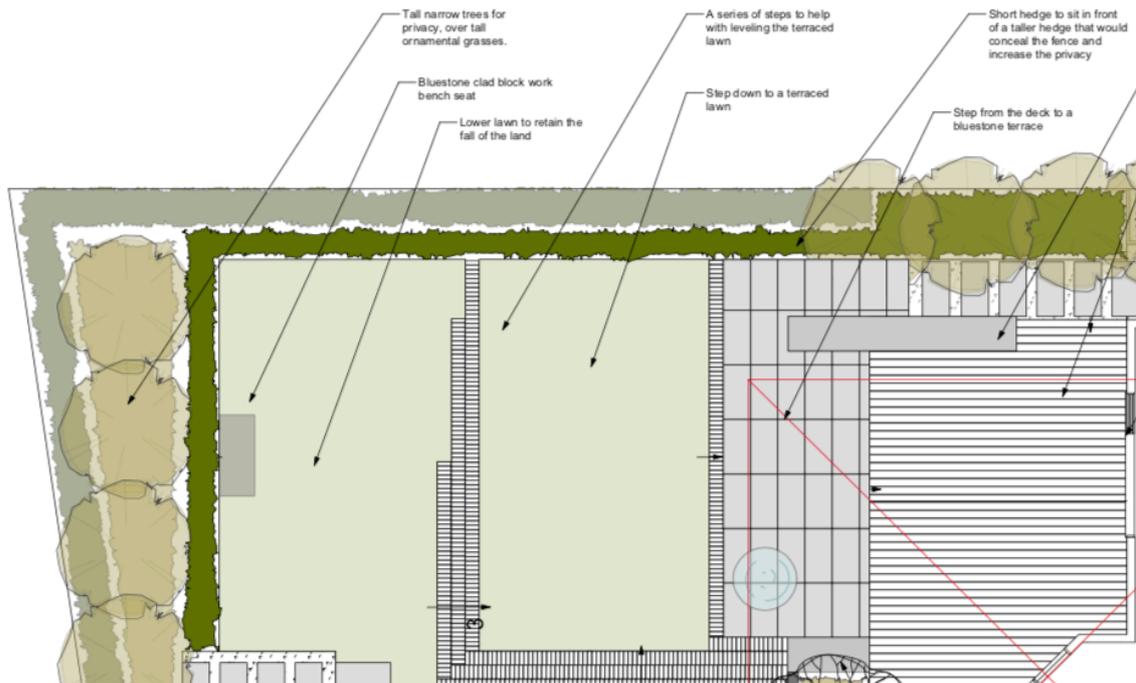
But no engineer or other requirement is necessary? Well then, a fixed quotation can be drawn up.

The point that gets lost is that a design is an intention, not the actual result you want. No one frames the design! The whole point of designing is that you intend to BUILD IT. And you can't build it without a costing, and you can't do a costing without a fully detailed design.

I know by now you have got my point. If it seems I am going on a bit, it is only that I see this so regularly.

When this happens, how does it play out? I usually say to the enquirer, "I can charge you xxx to complete the design for you?" – now in their minds, they paid for a design they just found out is not of the value they thought. One in a hundred people pay me! 99 people I never hear from again. They are not willing to pay 'again' for a design. They will seek out some landscaper who in the hope of a job will spend hours and hours working out all the designers missed details 'for free' in the hope of a job. Poor damn landscapers that get caught up in this!

Let me show you an example of this:



Above you can see the design does not detail anything that can be costed. This may not be the designers fault mind you; clients sometimes engage a designer and stop them by not paying for the next stage in the hope that they save a few dollars, false economy indeed!

Costly mistake #2

So you have narrowed your designer selection down by looking at example designs created and the ones you are considering all create fully detailed designs, brilliant, well done!

So the next deadly mistake is:

“Mistake #2, Engaging a designer who isn’t experienced in landscaping”

“Did I just read right, how can that be?” – Many designers have never been a landscaper and this shows up in what they design. I remember hiring a landscape architect to work for me several years ago, very creative and lovely chap. I was talking about his design and said, “use sleepers in it”, and he looked at me a little stunned and said, “what do you mean sleepers?” And equally stunned I said, “you know, the bloody things railway carnage’s run on!!!” – I then had to ask, “do you know what the usual size is for use in a retaining wall?” And again I got a shrug of the shoulders. “2400mm long by 75mm thick and 200mm high!” I told him. You would never say that to an experienced landscaper, they just know. How does this matter? I have seen designs created by inexperienced designers that designed walls. When you design you try to use whole or standard sizes, so if you are building a wall needing three sleeper long it would be 7200mm. But inexperienced designers will do 7040 or 7325mm and so you end up spending more time cutting them down and more waste of materials. It may be a simple point I am using

to explain things but what if you are building a brick column. Standard would be 470mm wide because a standard brick is 230mm, so two bricks wide plus 10mm of mortar. But the inexperienced designer will specify something weird like 520mm which is a lot of work to build and expensive.

I haven't mentioned the worst thing yet. Cost blow-outs!

Recently I was asked to provide a quotation for a design. The design was lovely and fully detailed and I had no design changes I saw necessary. I sent the quote to the client for just under \$600,000. I called the client and enquired as to their interest, it was one of those awkward moments you can hear the tension before a word is spoken, and I was told that it was way too much. "What is your budget?" I enquired. "\$150k" came the reply! – How on earth does a design go so over budget you may ask? Easily I am afraid. If you have never landscaped then you will have a hard time in designing to meet a budget. This poor client said, "leave it with me" which is of course code for, Crap, I have to solve this huge problem!

Costly mistake #3

So you have your designer and he has 7 years as a landscaper as a back ground, your doing well, you should hire him right? Mmm, lets talk some more first!

"Mistake #3, cheap is good!

"Andrew come on, it can't be this complicated." – Earlier today I had a chap come to see me for an initial consultation to talk about his design and whether he would engage me. On his questionnaire that I had given him days earlier there was a question, "Do you have any concerns engaging a designer?" To which he had noted something down. So when he came in I asked him to tell me more about his concern. He answered, "I want to make sure I am not paying way beyond what I should. I don't have an endless budget and I want the design to be really right but not engage someone who charges because of their awards" On further questioning he said he had been quoted \$7000+ for the concept (and I don't know if that was a fully detailed one or not) and I was about half this amount and he signed up with me (Hooray!). So cheap is good, no, not my point. The budget for his project would be \$50k and as a percentage \$7k plus was becoming too much. But if he had shopped around I know he could get someone for \$2000. Pricing is confusing to the general public. Basically, designers charge based on their overheads and perceived value.

So how much should I pay? The more complex the project the more you pay. The larger the block size the more you pay. The better quality designer, the more you pay. You want to brag you hired an award winning designer, the more you pay. Personally, I charge based on the number of hours I consider it will take to deliver the design, which I calculate based on above.

So by all means shop around and get prices but it should really be the least important thing (ye, of course I would say that). As we already talked about, fully detailed is first requirement. Next, experience (that is incredibly valuable), and then cost of design in ratio to budget of project. Don't engage a designer because they are \$1000 less than another because it is a good saving, not if you are getting a less experienced designer. More experience can save you much more than that.

There are many other considerations I will mention briefly here for you to think with:

What does the designer specialize in? I.e. don't hire a Coastal garden designer to do a Japanese garden.

You have to get along it's your designer. The better the relationship the better the outcome.

Some designers have a style that is their trademark, if that is what you want, great. But if you want a design customized around your personal tastes, then hire someone who's work varies.

What is your timeframe for when you want landscaping done. Check with the designer on their ability to deliver to that schedule.

And more, which I talk about in my book!

I hope this has been useful to you and you apply it successfully. I will be sending you more updates of useful information, so stay tuned and thank you for reading.