



Property lessons from reality TV

Property lessons from
The Block, House Rules
and all your favourite
TV shows



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Introduction

When the property market heats up, so do the renovation and real estate television shows, and we love to tune in and watch them. Reality television, particularly when property is involved, undisputedly gets the ratings and everyone talking. However, not every show is made equal – and *Property Observer* readers know not to take everything they watch as gospel.

In fact, while there are many places to get information from, it's unsurprising that many of us turn to reality shows to get a real estate thrill. But what can you actually learn from them?

In this eBook, we take a look at some of the biggest real estate television shows, cut through the drama, the crying and the truly ugly creations that some come up with, to provide the top lessons you can glean from the productions.

From careful selection of tradespeople, to smart design in small spaces, we've taken our tips from shows such as *The Block*, *Selling Houses Australia*, *Grand Designs* and *Location Location Location* to share with you in this eBook.

Jennifer Duke, Editor

10 property tips from reality television: The classics

While television series come and go – and come back again in *The Block*'s case – some property truths are forever. *Property Observer* takes a look at the tips that have stood the test of time.

1 COMPROMISE, COMPROMISE, COMPROMISE

Programs like *Relocation Relocation* showed that buying a property is all about making a series of small trade-offs. Location, location, location? More like location, room size, fit-out, maintenance... When you're investing in property, remember the fundamentals but be open to compromise.

2 EXPERTS ARE WORTH IT

Comparing the work of interior designer Shaynna Blaze to that of the newbies on *House Rules* shows just how much the experts really know. Sometimes, shelling out for someone who's seen it all really is worth it.

3 HOMES ARE FOR TRADING

There is a distinct difference between the way experts and buyers look at houses. The buyer looks at a house as though they will live there forever, while the expert sees the house as a temporary step on the property ladder.

4 DON'T DIY

Although it might look like the mammoth renovations on *The Block* were undertaken by a motley team of ordinary Australians, they were assisted by professional architects, foremen, designers and tradespeople.

Check out an episode of *Grand Designs*: the more the owner takes on, the more stressful and difficult the project seems to become. Don't be fooled into thinking that DIY renovations will necessarily cheaper.

5 A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

Particularly on *Grand Designs*, where houses invariably become “projects” or even better, are described as “buildings”. This underlines the gravitas of the house and sounds very cool too.

6 KEEP IT SIMPLE

The participants on many shows, particularly *Selling Houses Australia*, seem to have tastes that favour excess.

Interior designers and tradies invariably strip the houses right back so they look simple, clean and uncluttered.

7 THE BUDGET IS NEVER THE BUDGET

On all of these shows, the participants always spend over their budget, whether they are buying, building or renovating. Funny how emotion does that, isn't it?

8 THE DEADLINE IS NEVER THE DEADLINE

On the giant projects seen on *Grand Designs*, nothing ever runs to schedule. On the first episode of the new series of the British version of the program, the “build” took more than four years longer than expected.

9 MOST PEOPLE ARE UNREALISTIC

The sellers always want too much. The buyers always underestimate the price. The experts try and inject a realistic point of view.

10 YOU'VE GOT TO SPEND MONEY TO MAKE MONEY

This is the great lesson from *Selling Houses Australia*, where Andrew Winter convinces the stranded home owner to spend tens of thousands of dollars to renovate before they sell. But be careful not to overcapitalise and spend more than you can realistically make.

Five lessons from The Block: Fans v Faves

Now that the dust has settled and *The Block: Fans v Faves* is well and truly over, what can we learn from the final results?

Rookie renovators Steve and Chantelle took out the \$100,000 prize on top of a \$636,000 profit after selling their art deco apartment in Melbourne's Albert Park for \$2.47 million. The result makes Steve and Chantelle's profit margin the highest ever seen in *The Block's* 11-year history. They were followed by the winners of *The Block: Sky High*, twins Alisa and Lysandra, who attracted a \$2.375 million bid for their three story unit. Fans couple and competition favourites Kyal and Kara followed with a \$2.44 million sale, and Brad and Dale brought in \$2.31 million for their apartment

1 FITOUT MAY FADE, BUT ASPECT IS FOREVER.

While Steve and Chantelle's renovation skills may have left a lot to be desired at times, their street-fronting apartment had that all-important north facing aspect. With windows all along their western wall and huge arched windows at the north, their apartment was flooded with light. Should they wish to, changing the apartment's furnishings will cost the buyers relatively little.

When you're searching for a property to overhaul, make sure it has good fundamentals.

2 USE THE BUILDING'S NATURAL FEATURES.

Contestants this season were lucky enough to makeover one of the most interesting buildings in Albert Park, the former Dux Picture Theatre. With townhouses and apartments in the suburb already in high demand, the rarity of *The Block's* warehouse conversions were a huge pull for buyers and audiences. All four teams took advantage of this fact, playing up the industrial elements of their properties with complimentary timber work and exposed red brick.

3 LOCATION MATTERS, EVEN IN TV LAND

The Block's producers have an impressive track record of picking buildings in blue chip inner city suburbs, where demand runs hot and residences are hard to come by. As buyers' advocate Frank Valentic noted, the couple who purchased the winning apartment this series had been seeking a home in Melbourne's inner south for some time. With another series of *The Block* planned for Prahran, the trend is set to continue.

4 TREAT YOUR TRADIES WELL

Trouble with tradies was a running theme on *The Block: Fans v Faves*. Poor planning meant that teams at times had to re-do their work with different tradespeople, while disputes led twins Alisa and Lysandra to ditch one of their employees. When *Property Observer* spoke to contestant and professional carpenter Kyal Demmrich, he said that communication was key.

"If you're going to employ a tradesperson, you've got to be upfront and clear about your expectations," said Kyal. "And if you're not, you've got to voice it early on." Winning couple Steve and Chantelle have the right idea – they've been quoted saying that the first item on their spending agenda is a big party for all their tradies.

5 RENO SMART, SELL SMARTER

With the least experience and the least money, Steve and Chantelle relied on strategy, channelling their energies into the kitchen and living spaces and their master bedroom, two of the most valuable areas for buyers. But it was their clever choice to go last in the auction proceedings that was the couple's best play. In the end, high demand and low supply made the perfect ingredients for a winning price. There was a lot to look at in the first room reveal of *The Block: Fans v Faves*. The teams' guest bedrooms threw weird lamps, a transformer bed, stairs that went to (almost) nowhere and a barn door at the judges and viewers. But what stood was each team's use of art to add (or, unfortunately, subtract) from their room's décor.

Art styles for apartment décor: Lessons from *The Block*

Here are four tips to take away from the first room reveal.

1 SHAPE UP

Brad and Dale had the best use of art of any team in their guest room reveal, by a clear margin. Their circular abstract aerial piece by Barwon Heads artist Megan Weston (pictured below) was a terrific choice, especially because of its' circular shape.



For most home owners, paintings or photographs are simply more fiscally and spatially economical than sculptures or installations.

If you have the room or the money for a great sculpture in your home, go for it. But if a wall-hanging piece is what you have to work with, don't neglect its shape.

Rooms all over Australia are filled with squares and rectangles – corners, bricks, windows, and beds. Why add to the monotony with your art?

Brad and Dale's room was no exception to the square trend, a fact particularly evident with their minimalist styling.

But the “blokes” were smart enough to choose a circular art work that softened the room without sacrificing its clean aesthetic. The circles were mimicked throughout the room with woollen throw pillows and Billy Buttons (which, while we're at it, both added some textural intrigue), the circular bedside tables and the team's loopy lamps.

2 COLOUR CODING (DON'T DO IT)

While the amorphous shapes in Kyal and Kara's Christopher Cayetano framed prints (pictured below) were attractive, we at *Property Observer* cringed at the team's clumsy colour matching.



The dove grey of the room's walls was a dead ringer for the art, while matching off-white and muted sea foam throw pillows picked up the prints' accent colours to seal the deal. Unsubtle colour matching deadens the impact of artwork, reducing it to decoration.

Alisa and Lysandra did the same thing, matching their dreary deer artwork to the drapes. To their credit, at least the curtains were sheer, allowing some variation in light and texture to the matte canvas.

Chantelle and Steve were guilty of over-zealous colour matching as well, with the brown cow-hide rug, red decorative canisters and army-green books (of which there were far too many) all mimicking tones in their vintage “Melbourne” print.

In the room reveal episode, Brad and Dale lamented that the judges hadn’t noticed that their throw pillow picked up colours in the art work. But to our mind, that’s a good thing – rather than choosing obvious violet or turquoise furnishings, they picked a single, small item to echo a secondary colour in the artwork. Erring on the side of subtlety allowed the soft furnishings to lend the room a sense of cohesion, without seeming ham-fisted. Remember, a whisper, not a shout.

3 PLACES, PLEASE

As in all things, when positioning your artwork, try to avoid the obvious. A medium sized square print, inoffensive in both content and colour, centred over the bed? That’s exactly what Alisa and Lysandra chose to do, and the results were as boring as you might expect. The twins may have won the challenge thanks to their innovative use of space, but their use of art was wholly unremarkable. With such great variety in the textures room’s textures – the oak feature wall and door, the drapes and the exposed brick – it was a shame that the art was such a letdown.

Alisa and Lysandra’s placement of their artwork against the exposed brick wall was one of their major problems. The team described the art as a central feature of their room, with Alisa saying: “Without it, we couldn’t have been able to pull that room off... It was affordable and perfect for the loft feel we were going for. The rest just fell into place around it.”

But to *Property Observer*, the artwork’s dark colour and size meant that it became an uninteresting interruption to the wall’s texture, rather than a focal point of the room. The twins would have been better off with a hanging plant in the place of the art to juxtapose with the wall’s industrial feel and tie into the room’s other organic elements.

4 LIGHT AND DARK

The vintage “Melbourne” poster from Printism used by Chantelle and Steve was a nice choice. The print did veer dangerously close to kitsch given its art-deco surroundings, and displayed as a blind felt a touch self-conscious when paired with their other transformer feature, the convertible shelf/bed.

We especially appreciated the print’s scale – Chantelle and Steve were the only team to make a statement with the size of their art.



Even so, a large piece deserves to be featured in a space where it won’t blend in. By positioning an artwork with such warm tones, hard lines and dense detailing, it offers no relief for the eye set against the room’s exposed brick. The poster would have done better in a bright and airy space, contrasted against a light coloured wall.

Another alternative would have been to use Printism’s much brighter “Sydney” poster, which would offer considerably more contrast against the exposed brick and open up the room. But we at *Property Observer* understand that when it comes to home town loyalty, sometimes one’s hands are tied.

Incorporating art into your living spaces offers the opportunity to elevate a room from functional to emotional. Eschew the obvious, aim for intrigue over ornamentation, and go boldly.

The 10 best DIY renovation tips from the experts

A Mortgage Choice survey found that over 40% of homeowners plan to renovate their home to improve their quality of living.

“While renovations can potentially increase the value of a property, our survey results show that the purpose for many Australians is to improve their lifestyle by customizing their home to suit them,” says Belinda Williamson head of corporate affairs at Mortgage Choice.

The survey revealed that the outdoor entertaining area was among the top three most popular areas to renovate, followed by upgrading the kitchen and bathroom.

Property Observer has compiled a list of the top 10 renovating tips from the many experts.

1

CHRIS GRAY (PROPERTY EMPIRE)

Start by choosing the right property, making sure it is an unemotional investment, as opposed to an emotional home purchase.

Are you looking to buy, renovate and sell, or buy, renovate and hold? If you're selling it's imperative that there is an immediate and almost guaranteed profit in the deal. If you're looking to hold, you need to buy the right property that will continue to grow strongly forever. The renovation profit in a hold strategy is more about icing on the cake, maximising your rental return and ensuring you have minimal maintenance to do in the future.

2

SHAYNNA BLAZE (SELLING HOUSES AUSTRALIA)

Assess your lifestyle.

Before working out the design and layout of your home, the first thing for any renovators to ask themselves: how do I like to live? Is your lifestyle casual? Do you like to entertain? Do you hate cleaning or noise? These different lifestyles will not only effect how the layout is but also the surfaces and colours you end up choosing.

3 NICK TOBIAS (TOBIAS PARTNERS ARCHITECTURE)

Research your architect.

Establish a shortlist of architects you feel are best equipped in terms of aesthetic and technical prowess. Spend time reviewing the work of different practices, including speaking to past clients. Remember to keep things simple, trends come and go.

4 ANDREW WINTER (SELLING HOUSES AUSTRALIA)

Put your hard earned cash where it shows.

Make sure you put your hard earned cash where it shows. Quality kitchens and bathrooms will always add value to your home and a smart façade will make your house the envy of your neighbours.

5 AMANDA TALBOT (STYLIST AND AUTHOR)

5% of the value of your house should be in your kitchen.

Your kitchen needs a wow factor, including good storage; quality hardware, drawer runners and soft closing draw mechanisms. Five per cent of the value of your house should be in the kitchen.

6 CHERIE BARBER (RENOVATING FOR PROFIT)

1% of the value of your house should be spent on your bathroom.

Aim to spend between 1% to 1.5% of your current property value on your bathroom renovation. If your property is worth \$400,000, you would spend around \$4,000 renovating it.

Once you know your budget, allocate your money according to how immediately obvious each component is. If the vanity is the first thing you see when you come through the door, spend more money on a nice vanity, splashback and mirror. Your bathroom is the second most important room in your house, besides your kitchen, in terms of adding real fiscal value.

7 ANGUS KELL (ARCHICENTRE)

Go Green.

Go green and cash in on the latest change in buying behaviour. Buyers can't get enough of solar hot water, rainwater tanks and drip-feed irrigation systems.

8 PATRICK BRIGHT (EPS PROPERTY SEARCH)

Avoid doing the work yourself to “save money”.

A small budget means there is always a temptation to do some or all of the work yourself to save money but DIY renovations can easily backfire. If the quality of workmanship is substandard this will diminish your sale price, possibly eliminating any profit you might have made in much the same way as under-capitalising on a renovation.

9 LISA MONTGOMERY (RESI MORTGAGE CORPORATION)

Landscaping is important.

The indoor/outdoor room is now a popular part of the Australian lifestyle, so allow for a percentage of your overall budget to be spent on landscaping so you can complement the work you’ve carried out inside the house. Even if your budget is modest, basic greenery and clean, functional outside areas will only improve a property’s appeal.

10 CAROLYN BURNS-MCCRAVE (HOUSE RULES, BURNS-MCCRAVE DESIGN)

Work from the inside out.

A good floor plan is at the heart of a successful design and that each space should be tailored to the people who live there. Burns-McCrave says to work from the inside out; creating spaces that function and flow before thinking about colours and accessories.

House Rules: Would you buy a home off Gumtree without a building inspection report?



Western Australian couple Russell and Carole, contestants on *House Rules* 2014, purchased their home off Gumtree.

It was advertised under the heading “renovate or detonate”.

“Russell was being ridiculous looking at places that were too expensive so I plugged into Gumtree, ‘Houses for Sale’ and put in an amount that we could afford,” said Carole.

Despite the extensive work needed, Carole could see potential, falling in love with the valley views and then buying it without any building inspection report.

They now have a \$290,000 mortgage on the home, which has been renovated by their fellow contestants.

Their home on stilts was sitting unstable on an overgrown block in the Perth Hills.

“I wasn’t happy because there was so much work to do,” the administration manager, Russell recollects.

After he met Carole, who works for the local council, at a party in 2001, they renovated and sold their first Perth house at a profit.

But the pair lost money when prices dropped after the global financial crisis in 2008.

Carole and Russell are reminiscent of the 2013 couple Steve and Michelle at Collaroy Plateau in some ways. The Sydney couple had also previously hit tough times after putting money into a property development venture that went bankrupt. Even after Steve and Michelle sold their prior house, they still had debt to pay off.

There are currently anywhere between 2,000 and 4,000 properties for sale on Gumtree from \$1 million properties to desired swap arrangements. Many of them are offering the house for relocation with the land being kept by the owner.

To avoid a surprise when you purchase your house, make sure you get a building inspection report. Here's what you need to ask your building inspector:

- How long have they been working as a building and pest inspector?
- About the tools that they will use on-site: Moisture detectors are common, thermal imaging devices are less-so, while a laser level and sounding devices are in most building and pest inspectors' kits. If you're unsure, ask them what each does and what it checks for. You'll quickly discover what is and isn't necessary in your area.
- What geographical area they cover, and what the common issues are in your area.
- About some of their past experiences picking out issues in properties – asking for this qualitative information will help you identify how well they know their profession.

Creating the perfect New York style loft: Lessons from *The Block*

The four couples competing in the first episodes of *The Block: Fans v Faves* received a great design brief – set up a downtown Manhattan style loft.

With increasing demand for housing and the departure of manufacturers from Australia's capital cities, warehouse conversions and multi-use spaces are more popular than they've ever been. As more residents move into former industrial spaces, we can look to New York's lofts – and our Blockheads – for inspiration.

1 TURN ANOMALIES INTO FEATURES

When renovating a former industrial or storage space, capitalise on the features that make them unique.



Both winning fan couples – Chantelle and Steve and Kyal and Kara – made use of the graffiti that covered one of their walls. Kyal and Kara built a framing wall around the centre of the art work (pictured below), while the Chantelle and Steven lit the wall to make it a feature of the room.

Use the industrial characteristics of the space to your advantage, but don't try to force it. The judges appreciated Jesse and Kenny's haphazard wood panelling

behind their mounted television, but to us at *Property Observer* it seemed redundant and gauche. Attempting to shoehorn in “industrial” detailing where it doesn’t belong can seem as unappealing as, say, three burnt orange walls.

2 ART IS EVERYTHING

The couples competing in the season’s first episode, Kyal and Kara and Jesse and Kenny, both used the vintage posters gifted to them by Scott to great effect. Pascale and Chris, who were eliminated in the second episode, were the only couple to not use the designer piece provided to them. Instead, their standout feature was a lacklustre bedspread.

New York lofts were originally favoured by the city’s artists – with lots of room, few amenities to pay for and low rents, they were the perfect live-in studios before gentrification hit. Part of the enduring appeal of lofts is their association with major New York art movements – use that to your advantage.

While we might not all have a beautiful pre-existing piece of street art in our homes, it’s worth splashing out on a combination of art pieces that you love.

3 MORE IS MORE

Pascale and Chris, who pushed the “young professional” décor line when decking out their loft, ended up with a space that was more budget Scandinavian minimalism than Manhattan bohemian. Think of all the best lofts of cinema – Julianne Moore’s in *The Big Lebowski*, or Tom Hanks’s in *Big* – they’re all unapologetically filled with stuff.

Books, art, or furniture – don’t be afraid to put your favourite items on show. Stay away from sterility (Pascale and Chris’s bar spot lights) and steer towards warmth (Kyal and Kara’s amber pendant lights).

4 PLAY WITH SCALE

As Belle magazine editor in chief and *The Block* judge Neale Whitaker pointed out in both Fans elimination episodes – a loft is all about scale. When faced with a big blank space, be bold – upscale your rugs, your mirrors or your art; playing with proportion will inject liveliness into an open area.

Pascale and Chris’s cowhide rug was good – but wouldn’t it have been better if it were the giant rug rolled out in Billy Crystal’s New York loft in *When Harry Met Sally?* (Perhaps our preoccupation with décor on film is showing).

5 DIVIDE THE SPACE

With open plan spaces, zoning will make all the difference. Kyal's "speed wall" allowed the winning couple to break their room into bedroom, dining and living spaces. When there's little privacy to be had, quick solutions like modesty screens or a row of indoor plants to divide the space can make all the difference.

Without the aid of any dividing walls, Chantelle and Steve also managed to designate zones within their space. A simple designer chair in one corner and their ingenious suspended copper pipe clothes rack communicated that there were three spaces in one – a sleeping area, a living area, and storage.

While the winning couples transformed their rooms into multi-use areas – the essence of loft living – both losing couples reduced their "lofts" to single rooms.

The New York loft style provides a lot of opportunities to put your personality into your space. Proceed with abandon.

No such thing as a perfect property: lessons from *Location Location Location* Australia

Perfection and practicality are major themes of *Location Location Location*.

Take Andrew, who was looking for a one-bedroom unit close to the Sydney CBD with parking and pool within his budget of \$650,000. Andrew had looked at 100 properties without being able to settle on any.

“There is no perfect property, but there is a lot of excellent property out there and there is a subtle difference, but perfectionism is a bit of a disease and it’s really unhealthy,” said host Bryce Holdaway.

Once you’ve managed to swallow your perfectionist streak, make sure that you have a strategy when you’re putting your offer in. Andrew offered below the advertised asking price for his purchase but had everything lined up before at Holdaway’s advice.

“That’s part of our strategy – get the strata report done, get your bank all lined up and get the contract reviewed by the solicitor prior to us putting an offer in so now we’re in a really strong position and if the owner has a look at your offer, they’ll see it’s really compelling,” said Holdaway.

The show’s other host Veronica Morgan helped out Richard and Janey, another pair of Sydney-siders with a serious perfectionism problem.

They were looking for a three to four-bedroom home with a family friendly layout. They wanted to live in one of Sydney’s most expensive suburbs but had a budget of \$2.2 million.

Morgan encouraged the pair to compromise, asking whether location or space was more important – because their budget wasn’t going to stretch to provide both. She also imparted some sound renovation advice, saying that renovators should move into a house and live in it for a while to work out the best way to make the house work.

“The best renovations are a result of that,” she said.

And just as there’s no one perfect property, there’s no one perfect piece of real estate advice – from television shows or otherwise.

When the season ends, and the winners and losers are revealed, you're going to be left to your own devices. No cameras, bright lights or flashy celebrities. Take the best of these tips, and use them when it comes to your own renovating.