



Architects Advisory Service

Flood Recovery - Helpful Advice

Introduction

Like all Australians, Archicentre Australia has been shocked at the devastation wrought by the catastrophic floods throughout Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

Like many, we not only observed the damage...we experienced it during the Queensland floods of 2011. Our then Brisbane office disappeared beneath 1m of water, one of our staff members' homes was completely submerged and several of our architects were affected.

As a building advisory service, we have a long and proud tradition of providing independent, professional advice to property-owners and homebuyers. Our thoughts have naturally turned to helping people affected by the floods to get back on their feet.

This Flood Fact Sheet is intended to provide an overview of some of the key things that need to be considered by anyone whose home has sustained flood damage. Our hope is that it will help people to make critical decisions for the future in relation to repairing, rebuilding or relocating their home.

Supplementary Fact Sheets will deal with each of these issues in more detail and will be useful once an initial decision has been made about whether to repair, rebuild or relocate.

Given the dynamic nature of post-flood reconstruction Archicentre Australia will update these Fact Sheets as new information becomes available. Readers are encouraged to ensure that they have the most current version of our Flood Fact Sheets which are available from www.archicentreaustralia.com.au.

1. Clean-up

The aftermath of a flood event is a traumatic time with resources stretched and emotions strained.

The priority for most people is to get back into their property, to clean it up and to start repairing the damage as soon as possible. Whilst generous offers of assistance will fuel their initial enthusiasm, lasting and expensive mistakes can be made if this process isn't clearly understood.

It is a mistake, for example, to assume that once the debris has been cleared away repair work can start immediately. The real purpose of a clean-up is to fully expose the building so its condition can be carefully checked and so it can begin to dry out.

Floodwaters may have affected the structural integrity of the building or the ground on which it is built. Hidden damage may be present that will not become clear until much later and residual dampness will quickly affect the condition of any new materials installed too

quickly, leading to even greater expense and frustration.

There will also be many instances – regrettably – where the building is simply not viable and must be demolished. As heartbreaking as this may be, it’s important to consider longer term safety and security.

The clean-up process, then, is a sequence of events that must begin with certification by a licensed electrical contractor that power can be safely reconnected to the building.

Once this is done, debris removal can commence. Archicentre Australia has a range of Flood Fact Sheets that outline some of the things that need to be considered during the clean-up process, particularly in relation to safety, drying and building integrity. Floodwater will have a significant effect on building materials like particleboard, fibreboard, plasterboard and fibrous materials like insulation and carpets.

Keep in mind that very little is of your internal fitout is likely to be salvageable.

When the bulk of the debris has been removed, an assessment by an independent structural engineer is critical to establish the extent to which the structure or the foundations of the building have been affected. If the structure of the building is sound, repair can be considered, but if the building is deemed to be unsound there is little point in progressing with the clean up until further decisions are made.

No decisions should be made regarding the repair of the building until independent, written advice has been provided by a registered structural engineer. A structural engineer is the only person qualified to provide you with this advice.

2. Repair

Property repairs are complicated at the best of times and after a flood they can be even more problematic. It is highly unlikely that a building will be able to be repaired for some time after immersion in water. Timbers will need to dry out

for some months prior to fixing plasterboard and concrete slabs must be thoroughly dry before any floor coverings are laid. Work done in haste will inevitably need to be redone after only a few months.

Good trades-people will be in short supply, demand will be extreme and prices will inevitably rise. Unfortunately, there are likely to be people looking to capitalise on the misfortune of others. It will be more important than ever to have a clear sense of what work needs to be done and who should do it. It is also important to ensure that a fair price is being paid and that workmanship meets industry standards.

Registrations need to be verified, insurances need to be checked and contracts need to be signed to ensure that homeowners are not exposed to further financial risk. Archicentre Australia’s Flood Fact Sheets set out in detail the steps involved in briefing, finding and securing good quality trades-people.

3. Rebuilding

There will be many homes that have been destroyed by floodwaters or which have simply been damaged beyond repair. The priority for these unfortunate homeowners will be to establish temporary accommodation whilst they consider whether to rebuild or simply purchase an established home elsewhere.

For those deciding to rebuild, many will want to rebuild on the same property whilst others may prefer to purchase land and build elsewhere. In either case, there are many options including kit homes, project homes, purpose-designed homes and even house relocation. In all cases, however, there will be regulatory controls that determine what can be built, where it can be built and in some cases how it can be built.

As with any new home building project it’s important to make enquiries of all relevant authorities to establish just what can and can’t be done before deciding upon the course of action and certainly, before committing to any expense.

It is also likely that regulations will change in the aftermath of the floods, so regardless of how much you may want to start a rebuild process, it is imperative that you either engage an architect or make very sure that you are independently checking all advice that you are given. An architect can handle all of these considerations for you and these costs are likely to be covered by your insurance policy, but if you choose to look after this yourself then the local Council is the best starting point to determine whether any Planning/ Development controls affect the property or whether there are any specific siting issues that need to be considered.

It is also important to check the property title to see if there are any restrictions such as easements or covenants on the land that might have a bearing upon the design or the location of the building.

Our Flood Fact Sheets provide further information about the range of options available to anyone building a new home and some tips around design, permit procurement, tendering, contracting and quality control.

4. Relocation

For some people the prospect of rebuilding will be too daunting, will take far too long or will be too traumatic to contemplate. It is also something that will invariably be affected by changing legislation around flood prone areas that will further complicate the process and no doubt frustrate many.

Many will seek to leave the area and its painful memories behind, preferring instead to start afresh in another location. This will usually involve the purchase of an established home...an undertaking very few will be prepared for, let alone familiar with.

Any displaced person will quite naturally seek to arrange shelter as quickly as possible, however, it is important to consider carefully the most appropriate property location with respect to family, friends, work, schools and leisure facilities.

Once a preferred location and a budget have been established the search can begin. Most house-hunting these days is done via the internet using websites like realestate.com.au which will allow you to set up specific property searches to alert you to any properties fitting your criteria as soon as they are listed for sale.

If internet access is unavailable to you, have a friend or a family member set up a search and ask them to keep you informed. Seek out the real estate agents in the area you'd like to purchase and ask them to contact you as soon as something comes up that might fit the bill.

Once you've found 'the one', remember to research the neighbourhood, the property and the building thoroughly, including a building and pest inspection if you think you are likely to purchase it.

Make contact with a solicitor to assist you with the conveyancing and double check your borrowing capacity before making any offers, particularly if buying at auction. Make sure that you have left sufficient funds to cover any major faults identified in your pre-purchase inspection – remember that statistically around 1/3rd of all homes sold have a serious fault.

Archicentre Australia's Flood Fact Sheets contains a wealth of information about home buying, particularly homes being purchased with an intention to renovate or re-model.

Archicentre Australia extends its deepest sympathies to all those affected by the floods and hopes that this information is helpful.

If you would like to talk to an Archicentre Australia architect – a building expert - about a particular matter, please call Archicentre Australia on 1300 13 45 13 or go to www.archicentreaustralia.com.au