



Choosing Land for Your New Home

A PRACTICAL GUIDE





Keep close to nature's heart... and break clear away once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods.

Wash your spirit clean.

John Muir —————
Environmentalist

Whether you are building a home for a growing or downsizing family, a seaside or mountain escape, or an urban pied-a-terre, the geography and topography of your building lot will impact your design more than any other factor.

Use this guide to evaluate the pros and cons of different building lots and to determine if they will serve your goals for your new home.

Professional consultants and civil engineers can analyze properties for a fee, but, prior to making that investment, consider these seven factors to help your evaluation.

1. How will the landscape influence the design of your house?

I Do Have Land

If you already own land — or have a location picked out — remember that a home can and should be designed to take advantage of the natural landscape. Significantly altering the landscape to accommodate a home's design is not always feasible, is usually expensive, and often looks out of place.

I Don't Have Land

If you don't have land, first establish your priorities for your new home. Consider your lifestyle and how you will use the home. The list of priorities is a valuable touchstone as you visit properties and will be a good reference as you begin to design your home.

During the design phase, Bensonwood's team will help you develop your priority list into a budget and program scope for your new home.



2. What are the general characteristics of the land through the seasons?

Walk the land you are considering purchasing. Spend some time and imagine how it will look and feel throughout the seasons.

Sunrises and sunsets will impact the position of your house and wind exposure will impact your use of outdoor spaces. Seasonal streams and floodplains will be beneficial nearby, but you won't want to build over them. Foliage may also impact views and privacy as trees grow and shed their leaves throughout the year.

Learn what activities take place over the course of a year, in the neighborhood or nearby. The acoustics of a location such as road noise, airport traffic, nearby businesses and seasonal activities, such as snowmobile trails, aren't always within your control.




Fig. 1 / 3
Slopeside Gathering in winter.



Fig. 2 / 3
Goodnight Pond lot in summer.



Fig. 3 / 3
Ludlow Mountain Home interior in fall.



Your design team will help you balance views with energy efficiency options in the architecture of your home.

3. How will the site views and exposure support your quality of life?

Showcasing a spectacular view is a great way to add design and character into a home. A site usually offers opportunities and restrictions for the home's orientation and ability to capture views, including the type of foundation and the number of stories in your home.

If you're in a northern climate, a southern-facing house will help you capture solar gain in the colder months, saving on heating costs. Conversely, if you're in a southern climate, a northern-facing house will save on cooling costs.

4. How does topography and siting impact the cost of developing the lot?



Fig. 1 / 3
Mountain Modern in the building phase.

Your home will work with the landscape to connect living spaces to nature while maintaining private enclaves.



Fig. 2 / 3
Ludlow Mountain Home on steep hillside.



Fig. 3 / 3
Contemporary Timber Frame with lake views.

If the land you are considering is in a lot with zoned setbacks, or within a Homeowners Association (HOA), there may be little choice where you can site the home. These lots have often already passed many hurdles for development, including septic and other services, so can be great building choices.

Other lots, including large rural lots, might have more hidden costs. For example, the distance from the home to the road directly impacts the costs of developing the lot, as does the topography. A flat, open site with few rocks and well-draining soils will be the least expensive to develop. Hills, ledge, wetlands and wooded lots will all add costs, but can also add significant character.


5. What is the access for vehicles and utilities?

Unless you are building an off-the-grid cabin, you'll want an access road, or in some cases, an access waterway. For landlocked properties, be sure that a right-of-way over neighboring properties can be acquired.

Your future driveway may be separate from the access road once your home is built. Initial driveway costs and upkeep will vary depending on the length, grade and drainage. In rural and suburban locations, you'll want to consider parking spaces for family and guests, as well as turnaround space for delivery trucks.

While we aspire to build all-electric homes that run only on renewable energy, most homes still need to be connected to public utilities or need to accommodate on-site wells and septic systems. For wells and septic fields, you can hire a soil expert to do perc testing, as well as water table studies.





6. What are the local zoning, building code, and easement considerations?

A real estate agent and/or builder can put you in touch with an Accredited Land Consultant (ACS) with the legal and scientific expertise to offer both land and building advice. Your consultants will investigate the characteristics of the land and explore zoning, building codes, easements and other factors.

Before getting too attached to a particular location or design, familiarize yourself with local height restrictions, setbacks, easements, and other building code restrictions.

Don't forget to research any adjoining land that, if developed, would change the characteristics that currently attract you to the area.



7. What about a property with a tear-down?

Can I reuse the foundation?

Often, properties with old homes have great potential.

You might consider salvaging the existing structure and in some cases, it is worthwhile. A home inspector can tell you the value and the integrity of an existing structure to help you determine if it is worth renovating and fixing up or tearing down and starting from scratch.

Most existing foundations have also been compromised and cannot be used for new construction. You may find a creative use for an existing structure as an outbuilding that serves another purpose.

To Recap

1. How will the landscape influence the design of your house?
2. What are the general characteristics of the land through the seasons?
3. How will the site views and exposure support your quality of life?
4. How does topography and siting impact the cost of developing the lot?
5. What is the property access for vehicles and utilities?
6. What are the local zoning, building code, and easement considerations?
7. What about a property with a tear-down? Can I re-use the foundation?

In Conclusion —————

In general, it's best not to settle for a "problem" lot. The cost of addressing major issues and extensively altering a building lot can be far more expensive than paying a little more for land that naturally complements your goals.

The ability to build a home on land of your own choosing is a special opportunity. Thoughtful consideration can help you make a great choice for your new home. Professionals are available to assist and guide you in evaluating your options and avoiding pitfalls. Ultimately, building a home on land that truly speaks to you is a gift you will wake up to every day.



For more information on homes that are uniquely suited to your land, please visit:
www.bensonwood.com.

Smarter Paths

Preserving and protecting resources and open spaces requires dedication and experience. We can help you design, engineer and build performance into a space you'll want to call home. Contact us to find out how Bensonwood's decades of expertise have helped countless customers achieve a rare and functional beauty that lasts.

Get in Touch

Contact our sales team at (603) 756-3600 or sales@bensonwood.com



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