Pre-Development Consulting

Site strategy, cost intelligence, and feasibility analysis for residential development

Layout, cost, and viability. Tested together, before any capital gets committed to a design.

The Feasibility Gap

Residential development projects between 4 and 30 units tend to follow a familiar sequence. A developer acquires a site, engages an architect to design something, waits for the design to develop, then commissions a cost estimate or collects builder quotes. If the numbers don't work, the design gets revised. If they still don't work, the project gets shelved, along with six to twelve months of professional fees.

The problem is structural: cost intelligence arrives too late to influence the decisions that matter most. By the time a developer knows what a project actually costs, the layout is fixed, the planning application is lodged, and the only lever left is cutting specification or renegotiating builder margins. The strategic window, where layout, orientation, unit mix, and construction approach can still be shaped around financial reality, has already closed.

At this project scale, full quantity surveying engagement is often disproportionately expensive and slow. Builder quotes arrive late, vary widely, and reflect the builder's preferred approach rather than the optimal one. The developer is making the most consequential financial decisions of the project on incomplete information.

What We Do

We provide pre-development consulting for residential projects in the 4 to 30 unit range. The work integrates site strategy, cost estimation, and feasibility analysis into a single collaborative engagement, delivered before the design commitment.

This is not a report-production service. We work with the developer to understand the site, explore what it can support, test layout and cost scenarios together, and arrive at a strategy that has been pressure-tested from multiple angles before anyone commits to a design direction.

Site Strategy	Cost Intelligence	Feasibility Analysis
Planning envelope analysis. Massing studies testing 2 to 3 layout configurations. Orientation, access, parking, and site constraint mapping. Where applicable: microclimate, resilience, and insurance exposure assessment.	Independent cost estimates for each layout option, built from current market rates with trade-level detail. AI-assisted quantity extraction calibrated to local market conditions, including material escalation, labour availability, and current code compliance costs.	Total development cost against expected revenue for each scenario. Land, construction, finance, fees, contributions, and contingencies measured against sale prices or rental yields. Risk-adjusted comparison across options.

For projects in fire-prone, flood-exposed, or climate-sensitive locations, the feasibility analysis extends into resilience cost modelling: how design decisions affect long-term insurance premiums, what site-level risk mitigation is worth in avoided cost over the holding period, and where environmental offset or carbon credit potential changes the project economics.

How We Work

The engagement is collaborative, not transactional. We work alongside the developer through a structured process that builds understanding of the site and the numbers together, rather than producing a report in isolation.

Phase 1: Site Research and Strategy Session

We begin with the site itself. Planning controls, overlay constraints, access, services, and anything that limits or enables development. We combine desktop research (GIS, satellite imagery, planning databases, market data) with a strategy session to understand the developer's goals, constraints, and risk appetite. The aim is to define the realistic development envelope before testing layouts against it.

Where the site has climate exposure (fire, flood, reactive soils, coastal risk), this phase includes a preliminary site systems reading drawn from our Property Intelligence methodology. The cost of ignoring site-level risk at feasibility stage compounds through every subsequent decision.

Typical duration: 2 to 3 weeks

Phase 2: Layout Options and Cost Scenarios

We produce 2 to 3 massing studies in SketchUp, each representing a different approach to the site: unit count, typology mix, building footprint, parking strategy. These are strategic layouts, not architectural designs. They exist to test the question: what configuration makes the most financial sense for this site, given its constraints?

Each layout option receives an independent cost estimate. We use AI-assisted quantity extraction from the massing models combined with current market cost databases, adjusted for local conditions: regional price variations, trade availability, current code requirements, and material lead times. The estimates are detailed enough to compare options meaningfully and to serve as a benchmark when builder quotes arrive later.

Typical duration: 2 to 4 weeks

Phase 3: Feasibility Review and Recommendation

We sit down together and work through the numbers. Total development cost per option, expected revenue, margin, and risk profile. We stress-test assumptions: what happens if construction costs escalate 10%? What if sales prices soften? Where is the break-even, and how much margin sits between you and it?

For projects with resilience or environmental dimensions, this review includes long-term cost modelling: insurance premium trajectories based on design decisions, defendable space and fire rating implications, potential biodiversity or carbon offset credits that improve the project economics, and any climate adaptation measures that reduce lifecycle cost.

The engagement concludes with a clear recommendation: proceed, proceed with conditions, or reconsider. If proceeding, the deliverable package includes everything needed to brief an architect with a tested layout, a cost target, and a financial framework already in place.

Typical duration: 1 to 2 weeks

Total engagement: 5 to 9 weeks depending on site complexity and decision timeline.

What This Changes

Standard Approach	With Pre-Development Consulting
Architect designs first. Cost follows.	Cost and feasibility drive the design brief. The architect receives a tested layout with a budget target, not an open-ended design problem.
Builder quotes are the first cost information.	An independent cost estimate exists before any builder is engaged. Quotes are evaluated against a benchmark, not against each other.
One layout is developed to planning stage.	Multiple configurations are tested at low cost before committing. The difference between the best and worst option on the same site is often hundreds of thousands in project margin.
Site risk surfaces during construction.	Site conditions, climate exposure, and resilience costs are assessed at feasibility, when they can still influence design rather than generate variations.
Insurance is an afterthought. Premiums are accepted.	Insurance exposure is modelled into feasibility. Design decisions that reduce the risk profile are quantified: the investment in resilience measured against the premium reduction over the holding period.

Ongoing Engagement

If the project proceeds, the cost intelligence and site knowledge from the feasibility engagement carry directly into subsequent phases. Each is a separate engagement, structured to the project's needs.

Phase	What we do
Design-Stage Cost Management	Ongoing cost tracking as the design develops. We review the architect's work against the feasibility budget at key milestones. Design decisions that affect cost are flagged in real time, while there is still room to adjust without losing work.
Tender Review	Independent assessment of builder tenders against the cost estimate baseline. Line-by-line comparison across submissions. Risk flagging where quotes are light (likely to generate variations) or heavy (opportunity to negotiate). Negotiation support.
Construction-Phase Cost Oversight	Progress claim review, variation assessment, and cost-to-complete tracking. Monthly reporting that keeps the project on budget without the overhead of a full-time project management team.

Sample: Pre-Development Assessment Extract

Fictional example: 1,200 sqm infill site, metropolitan suburb. Zoned for medium-density residential. Previous single dwelling demolished.

Strategic Synopsis

The site supports 6 to 12 dwellings depending on typology, with the primary constraint being the rear interface setback to an established residential neighbourhood on the southern boundary. Three configurations were tested. The preferred option (6 three-bedroom townhouses in a courtyard arrangement) delivers a 16.9% project margin at current construction costs and market values, with the lowest risk profile of the options tested.

Critical Findings

Finding	Rating	Financial Impact
Reactive clay across eastern 40% of site. Standard strip footings inadequate. Engineered slab or pier-and-beam required for any dwelling with footprint in this zone.	**CRITICAL**	$85K to $140K additional foundation cost if discovered mid-construction. $30K to $50K if addressed in design.
Northern orientation compromised by existing three-storey apartment building on adjacent lot. Solar access to ground-level living areas limited to 2.5 hours midwinter for units in the northern third of site.	**SIGNIFICANT**	Energy rating penalty. Affects NatHERS/Title 24 compliance cost by $8K to $15K per affected unit.
Mature canopy trees along western boundary meet criteria for significant vegetation overlay. Removal unlikely to be approved. Root protection zones extend 4m into buildable area.	**SIGNIFICANT**	Reduces effective buildable area by approximately 15%. Potential offset credit value if retained and managed.
Stormwater infrastructure at capacity. Council likely to require on-site detention. Site topography enables gravity-fed system if integrated into landscape design rather than treated as underground tank solution.	**MODERATE**	Gravity-fed approach saves $60K to $90K vs. conventional detention tanks. Requires early coordination with landscape architect.

Recommendation

Proceed with the 6-townhouse courtyard configuration. Commission targeted geotechnical investigation scoped to the eastern reactive zone before design development. Brief the architect with the courtyard layout, the solar access constraints for northern units, and the root protection setback along the western boundary as fixed parameters. Engage landscape architect early to integrate the stormwater detention into the courtyard design. Estimated total development cost: $3.85M. Expected revenue at current market: $4.50M. Project margin: $650K (16.9%) with a 12% contingency buffer before break-even.

This is an extract. The full deliverable includes massing studies for all tested configurations, trade-level cost breakdowns, full feasibility model with sensitivity analysis, and a detailed next-steps brief for the design team.

About Listen Advisory

Listen Advisory is the consulting practice of Jo Petroni, a second-generation architect with 20 years of experience across residential and commercial projects in Europe, the United States, and Australia.

Our background is in bioclimatic architecture and site-responsive design, which means we read development sites as integrated systems rather than abstract footprints. That training gives us an unusual perspective on pre-development work: we see the cost implications of site conditions that a standard feasibility study treats as externalities. Soil behaviour, microclimate, fire and flood exposure, ecological corridors, and long-term climate trajectory are not separate from the financial model. They are the financial model, over any meaningful holding period.

The cost estimation capability is powered by AI-assisted quantity extraction and current construction cost databases, calibrated to local market conditions. This gives us the speed and detail of a dedicated quantity surveying engagement at a fraction of the cost and timeline, backed by professional judgment on risk, buildability, and market context.

We also provide Property Intelligence Reports for sites with significant climate exposure, environmental complexity, or long holding periods. The PIR is a deeper site intelligence engagement that sits upstream of the pre-development work and can be commissioned independently or as part of a combined engagement. Details at jopetroni.com/pir-development.pdf

Contact

Book a call	cal.com/jopetroni/discovery
Email	jo@jopetroni.com
Web	jopetroni.com
LinkedIn	linkedin.com/in/jopetroni
Property Intelligence Reports	jopetroni.com/pir-development.pdf

Listen Advisory services Europe, the United States, and Australia. Engagements are delivered remotely with on-site assessment available by arrangement. Pricing is project-specific and discussed on initial consultation.