

36 *the project*

Upstairs downstairs

*A basement can add an unbelievable amount of space
and value to your house and they can be as bright and as
dry as any other room in your house*

WORDS: Lee Cheshire



If you're looking to add more space to your property you have three basic options: build up, build out or build down. With extensions difficult to get past planning, and lofts limited in terms of space, adding a basement can be the perfect solution. If well-designed and built, there's no reason why a modern basement should be dark or damp.

Maggie Smith from the London Basement Company says extending down is more popular than ever, and an economical alternative to moving. Although moving the earth beneath your feet doesn't come cheap, at around £300-£350 a square foot, it makes sense in parts of London where a lot of properties can cost £1,000/sq ft.

After a certain level, bigger spaces get very rare in London, says Maggie, especially in desirable areas such as Fulham and Battersea, and moving might not be an desirable option. "This is so much about people enjoying where they live. They have probably already invested a lot of money into the property. The kids are in the local schools. They are quite settled." Adding a basement can provide much needed family and leisure space.

This project in Putney is one of the company's smallest but most stunning – a chic modern kitchen joined to the living room with a split-level glass staircase. It is so flooded with light through the French windows to the front of the house, it is hard to tell that it is not the original ground floor.

At around 450 sq ft – roughly the size of the normal cellar it started out as – this is one of the company's smaller projects. But a basement is not limited by the footprint of the house: it can stretch out underneath the garden. They have recently completed a basement that is an extraordinary 3,500 sq ft, providing space for living room, a games room with a full-sized table tennis table, a utility room, and a big empty room ▶



Opposite: This Putney home is owned by an architect, who handled the final fit out. However, your basement company will be able to handle the entire project if required

Above: Although this basement started out as an existing cellar, the company will dig most of it out from scratch

Left: Basements are usually dug down from the front of the house, creating the light wells and leaving your living space unaffected



left over which the kids use for games of football and cricket.

Cunning planning of light wells, electric lighting and rooms (liveable areas at the front and back, service rooms in the middle) prevent even such a big basement seeming dark. Head heights are normally the same as your other rooms – between 2.4m and 3m is usual.

The building work is surprisingly undisruptive. Most of time they dig down from the front of the house, creating the front light well, then underneath the house, one square metre at a time, underpinning as they go. The diggers enter the site through a secure hoarding and the waste leaves through a covered conveyor belt. This means that you can continue to live in the house normally for most of the time while the work goes on.

Not every house can have a basement added, of course, and pre-1950s houses are the best. Modern homes are often built on a solid concrete base, which can be worked with, but adds to the cost and disruption. If your area is new to the company, they will come and dig a bore hole to investigate the ground – you don't want your house dropping through onto the tube system! Most other obstructions can be moved however.

London Basement Company only install the most effective form of waterproofing – a sump pump that runs 24 hours a day. This ensures that no damp gets through and water is removed entirely, rather than hanging around and messing up your neighbours' foundations.

Planning permission is not always easy to obtain, especially for listed properties –

Kensington and Chelsea is becoming more reluctant, says Maggie – but often objections can be overcome through sensitive and subtle handling of the light wells, which are usually the only part of the design externally visible. Party wall awards are also required.

Of course, when you do move, the extra space is bound to add value. One of London Basement Company's clients had their house revalued after adding a basement, and found it had gone up from £975,000 to £1.3m. Other cases support the idea that you could add over 25% – even in a falling market, a basement will help you stay one step ahead. "It's an investment that you can enjoy now," says Maggie. ↑

Above: Any type of room can go in basement, including those that need complex services. Kitchens and laundry/utility rooms are popular choice

TOP TIPS

Plan ahead

Gaining permissions, surveying and design can take time. Allow about a year for the whole project – five-six months for planning and design, 12-20 weeks for the structural work, and four-eight weeks for the fit-out.

Check out your foundations

More recent houses, especially built in a block, can be difficult to add a basement to. If your house is built after 1950, consult first.

Be a good neighbour

An obstructive neighbour can make the required

permissions much harder to obtain, and could slow down the process by months. Keep them informed about the process and how it will affect them. London Basement Company strive to be as undisruptive as possible.

Consider lighting

Good lighting design can be the making of a basement, especially larger ones where natural light will find it difficult to filter in.

Work out what you need

Having a full idea of what rooms will go in your basement will help the planning process.