

Mixing layers of light brings a soft gentle glow to this basement room



# Convert your basement into valuable extra space

Dig deep to open up the area underneath your home

In order to gain more space in our homes, most of us think about adding an extension, going up into the loft or reworking the layout. However, by converting a cellar or excavating a basement, you can create a whole new floor with flexible rooms to use as dens, playrooms, bedrooms, gyms or family

rooms. Basements are built as standard in many north American houses, but over here we're only just beginning to realise their potential. Converting the area under your home can transform the way you live, but is a major project, so here are the important questions to ask before you go ahead.

## WHAT'S INVOLVED?

Work is labour intensive and involves digging out the area by hand and underpinning the foundations, so that they can support the extended structure. It will then need to be made completely waterproof. This is the most important part of the process and a highly specialised job, carried out using either waterproof rendering or a textured membrane. Existing basements or cellars can be kitted out in just a few weeks, and, according to Maggie Smith of the London Basement Company, a basement conversion on a modest Victorian house takes 12 to 24 weeks. It's not as disruptive as you may think, as access to the site is usually through the garden, with the staircase fitted towards the end.

## IS MY HOME SUITABLE?

Most types of property – even some ground floor flats – are candidates for basement conversions. The work tends to be carried out in homes where it isn't possible to transform the loft into living space – perhaps because this has already been done – and there isn't room to extend out into the garden. It's quicker and less expensive to excavate an existing cellar, in which the ceiling height will need to be a minimum of around 2.4 metres, but if you don't have one, a retrofit basement can be dug out. It's even possible to build under a solid concrete floor, and to extend the footprint of the house under the back and front gardens.



◀ The logo on these hoardings on a London street provides a clue to the work taking place



## CASE STUDY 1



*'It took just six weeks to transform our cellar'*

When Denise Stein bought a converted flat on the ground floor of a Victorian semi in Sheffield, there was more than enough space for one. However, when she met and subsequently married her partner, Brian, the open-plan apartment suddenly felt rather cramped. 'Brian had two children from his first marriage and, when they came to visit every weekend, we were really stuck for space,' says Denise.

As they couldn't afford to move to a

bigger property, they initially considered building an extension but had to rule it out on the grounds of cost. Having given up on the idea, they were watching a TV property programme when they realised the potential for an extra room already existed beneath their 100-year-old house. 'They showed how one couple had cleared out their cellar to create an extra sitting room for their kids,' Denise remembers. 'As our situation was quite similar, it seemed like a feasible solution for us'.

Denise and Brian only ever used the cellar as a storage area. Although it was partially below ground level, there'd never been a problem with damp and, with electricity laid on and a glimmer of light from a small window, it certainly had the potential to become a useful extra room. The major expense was digging out a semi-sunken terrace at the rear of the basement, and then re-building

◀ In a dual-purpose room, built-in storage is always a good idea to keep the space looking neat and tidy



This Victorian semi was short on space for a family before its owners discovered the potential of the cellar

the end wall and installing a larger window to let in more daylight. The couple then ensured the area was fully damp-proofed before decorating and making safe the old staircase that led down from the kitchen.

Though they had planned to use the converted cellar mainly as a playroom, and invested in storage furniture for all their toys, the Steins soon spotted the room's versatility and it's now dual-purpose. By splashing out on a new leather sofa-bed, they've created a spare bedroom where overnight guests can sleep in comfort.

## WHO WILL DO THE WORK?

Firstly, get the area assessed by a specialist basement conversion company or a structural engineer to see whether the project is viable. It goes without saying that you must employ highly experienced professionals to carry out the work. You can either get plans from an architect, use recommended builders for the job, and project manage it yourself or pay someone else to do so, or alternatively employ a specialist basement conversion company to see the build through from the ideas stage to completion. The latter option will be more expensive, but also less stressful. Never cut corners by employing cheap builders as a botched basement conversion could cost thousands of pounds to put right.

A versatile layout enables this basement room to have a variety of functions

Image [www.londonbasement.co.uk](http://www.londonbasement.co.uk)



## WILL I NEED TO GET PLANNING PERMISSION?

When converting an existing basement you're unlikely to need planning permission, but you will require it for a retrofit basement which has to be dug out, or if the building's external appearance is changed, for example by adding a light well. You will always need building regulations consent which covers areas such as fire escape routes, ceiling height, damp proofing and electrical wiring. One requirement is that basement bedrooms must be fitted with egress windows, which are large enough to provide a means of escape in an emergency. You'll need a Party Wall Agreement if the work affects walls shared with neighbours.

▼ This metal grid conceals a light well beneath



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## CASE STUDY 2

*'We knocked down the walls in our basement to create a kitchen-diner'*

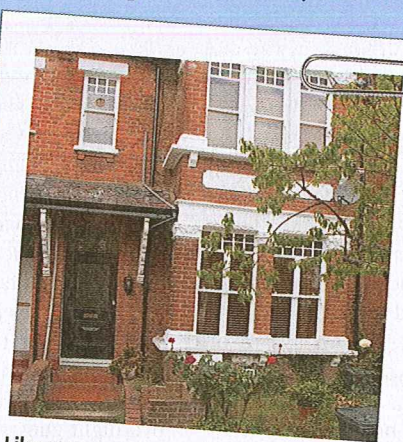


Living in rented accommodation for the early years of their married life was the only option open to George and Sally Harper while they saved to buy their first home. They kept their eyes peeled for an unmodernised property in their home town of Bolton, hoping to pick up a bargain. 'We thought we could only afford a wreck, but were prepared as George has renovated places before and knows what's involved,' explains Sally.

Eventually they settled on a Victorian townhouse, with a large basement area that hadn't been touched since the house was built. 'It was a warren of poky rooms, including a coal cellar, pantry and a scullery,' Sally recalls. 'However we could see the potential to open it up and create a large kitchen/diner.'

They also decided to add a glass-roofed extension at the rear of the property to let in more light. With the connecting walls removed, the basement is now a long, narrow space divided into its three separate functions – the extension has become a cosy seating area, there's a farmhouse-style table and chairs in the centre of the room and the area below street level is where the kitchen has been installed. The Harpers decided to keep the chimney breast from the old scullery but replaced the coal-burning stove with a state-of-the-art range cooker. The rest of the kitchen is quite basic with run of base and wall units on the facing wall and an inexpensive work bench in the centre. 'We deliberately kept it simple – as we didn't want to clutter up the space or make it look too modern,' says Sally. 'We love it the way it is.'

◀ Sally and George are proud of their unfitted kitchen, where old-fashioned cabinets give them all the storage space they need



Like many properties of a similar age, the Victorian house had a basement with untapped potential

Image [www.morphinterior.com](http://www.morphinterior.com)



Full-width doors and pale colours enhance the feeling of space in this open plan area

### IS IT COST-EFFECTIVE?

It's impossible to give a definitive starting price as every project is unique, but Maggie Smith estimates that a 300-400 square foot new basement costs from around £280 to £300 per square foot. It's certainly the most expensive way of increasing your home's volume which is why it's most popular in the south east, where property values are highest. But it might not seem so pricey when you weigh up the relative costs of moving house and paying stamp duty – and that's assuming you'll be able to find an equally spacious property you want to buy. Adding space will always add value to your home, even in a stagnant market. For peace of mind, do your sums carefully and get an estate agent to do a valuation.

This light, bright living area is testament to the fact that basements don't have to be dull and dingy



Image [www.londonbasement.co.uk](http://www.londonbasement.co.uk)

### WILL IT BE LIGHT ENOUGH?

Maximising natural daylight is a priority in a well-designed basement conversion. Incorporating light wells at the back and front of the house will allow large windows to be fitted, making the area brighter. Keep rooms pale and uncluttered, and think the lighting scheme through carefully. Sally Storey, Design Director of lighting specialist John Cullen, believes that the most boring way of lighting a basement is with a central row of downlights alone. She recommends using uplights and downlights, and combining different layers of light. If the basement looks out onto a small light well, illuminate it, as highlighting something outside the window will draw your eye outside and create an extended feeling of space.



## CASE STUDY 3

### 'Converting the basement has doubled the size of our home'

**R**obert Carroll and Laura Beswick live in a large Victorian tenement flat in central Edinburgh.

However, their home hasn't always been so big. Before Laura moved in, Robert lived in a building site for a year while it was being transformed from a one-bedroom flat with a basement into a three-bedroom ground floor and basement flat, with direct access to the communal garden behind. Prior to the conversion, the basement was accessed via a vertical staircase through a hatch in the floor. It was partitioned with breeze block walls and contained a darkroom and work bench area, and had one small window. Robert, who is managing director of MOV8 Real Estate estate agents and solicitors in Edinburgh, saw the potential of the flat immediately as it was a rare

find with a large, full-height basement. He originally bought it to renovate and sell on, but, after investing so much time and effort in the project, and with the uncertainty of the property market, selling became a less attractive proposition and he decided to make it his permanent home.

Work took longer than expected, but there were no disasters apart from when one of the builders pulled the ceiling down, filling the flat with clouds of



No evidence of the basement can be seen when looking at the exterior of this elegant Victorian tenement

black soot. Robert's delighted with the end result, and feels that the sacrifices were well worth it. Laura is well aware of what her home used to look like. 'The difference between the property before and after is incredible,' she says. 'Before the work was done, this flat was only suitable for a couple but you probably wouldn't have wanted to raise a family in here. Now, when that time comes, we won't have to move. We have enough rooms, direct access to a garden and the flat is on the ground floor so no carting buggies upstairs.'

◀ The spacious master bedroom is on the basement level and includes built-in wardrobe and an en suite shower room

### TOP TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL BASEMENT CONVERSION

- Include a shower room and utility room to make the area more versatile.
- Ensure the new floor blends in with your existing home, and match up staircases if possible.
- Keep neighbours on side by letting them know exactly what the work involves.
- Get consent from the freeholder before converting the basement in a leasehold flat.

▼ The glass balustrade on this elegant staircase help to give the area a spacious, airy feel

Careful thought has been giving to lighting this smart bedroom, which forms part of a basement conversion



Image [www.londonbasement.co.uk](http://www.londonbasement.co.uk)

### Useful contacts

- [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com) will enable you to find an architect with the relevant experience.
- [www.johncullenlighting.co.uk](http://www.johncullenlighting.co.uk) will be able to design the perfect lighting scheme for your new space.
- [www.londonbasement.co.uk](http://www.londonbasement.co.uk) is a specialist basement conversion company.
- Visit [www.planningportal.gov.uk](http://www.planningportal.gov.uk) for current planning requirements.
- **Remodelling a Basement**, Roger German, £16.99, published by Taunton, is a practical guide to getting it right.



Image [www.londonbasement.co.uk](http://www.londonbasement.co.uk)

▲ Cleverly combining old and new, this basement conversion forms part of a larger project. Extensive use of glass lets light into even those hard-to-reach areas

Image [www.cantifix.co.uk](http://www.cantifix.co.uk)