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GOING UNDERGROUND

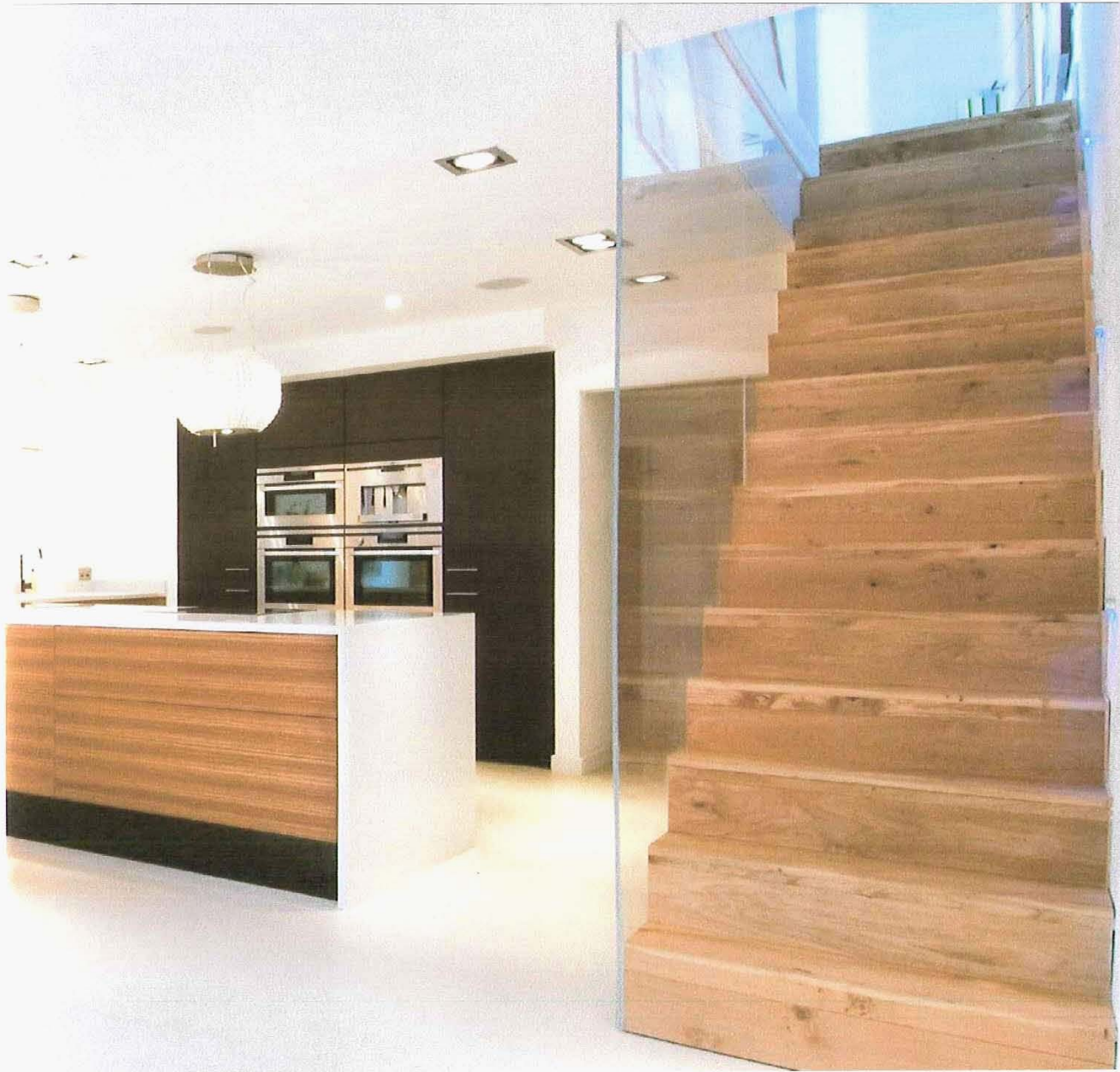
High ceilings and a carefully designed lighting scheme can ensure that a basement space doesn't feel claustrophobic, as demonstrated by this basement kitchen living area in Cheltenham by In-toto



WORDS: AMELIA THORPE

Going down, rather than up or out, is the way to go when you need more space in the city – so say the basement experts. We dig deep for the best advice and ideas on installations

Down



Under

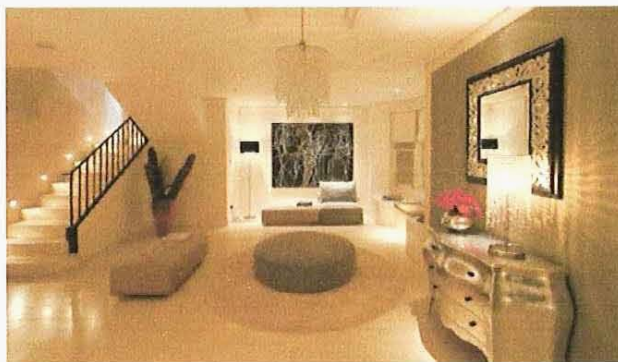
If a basement space brings to mind a dark and damp troglodyte cave, think again. Advances in engineering, modern waterproofing techniques and imaginative design of light wells have brought us a new generation of those living comfortably down under.

'There's a huge demand for basements, particularly in central London,' says Alex Michelin of Finchatton. 'The cost of moving is so great, who wants the hassle? People prefer to stay where they are and make more space, especially at the moment, when who knows what house prices are doing. If you can't go up or out, because of stringent planning regulations, the only way to go is down.'

The London Basement Company finds itself tackling larger and increasingly impressive jobs, according to manager Maggie Smith. So why the trend? 'What can be achieved is now becoming well known, and the engineering capabilities are improving all the time,' says Smith, whose company excavates well over 100

basements each year to create home cinemas, games rooms, family rooms, gyms, saunas, spas, pools, staff accommodation, utility rooms, plant rooms and wine cellars. New shoring and piling technologies mean that basements can be deeper than ever before. Dominic Benoist of Symm finds clients opting for two or three levels. 'Especially in central London; it's common to find a gym and pool on one level with a cinema above, and some clients are putting in car parks as well,' he says.

An added level or two of floor space can also make a house more saleable, and not only because it extends the rooms in the house. Architect Gregory Phillips explains: 'By putting things such as the utility and plant rooms in the basement, the ground floor becomes more spacious, attracting a premium.' And what does it cost? Smith cites several examples where the basement has added about 35 per cent to the value of the house, at a cost of around £300 per sq ft (more than £3,000 per sq m). The



BASEMENT BASICS

Considering excavating or converting a basement? Dominic Benoist of Symm provides essential guidance

01 Is the property detached, semi-detached or part of a terrace? A new basement may have a knock-on effect with neighbours, so may need planning permission

02 Is it practical? This depends on the likely foundations of the property, so trial holes to determine their depth and construction are important, and help determine the costs involved in the project. Deep brick or concrete foundations are likely to be much better than a raft foundation; an existing cellar is usually a good starting point; and

building two, three or more storeys is structurally far more difficult than one.

03 What about ground water? It is possible to build a basement by the Thames on a gravel base, but the cost will be massive compared to building on a site on top of a hill which is not going to need constant de-watering.

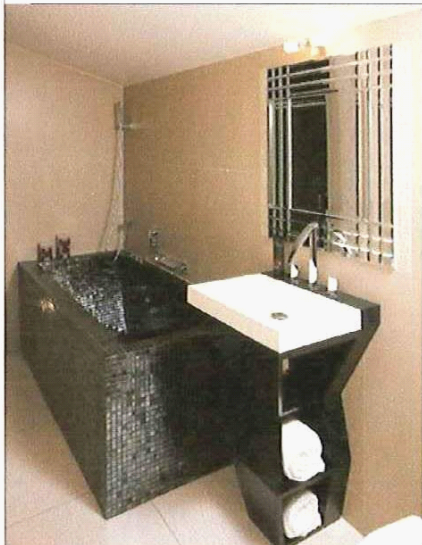
04 What's underneath the house? Tube stations, sewage pipes, high voltage power cables, gas mains and water pipes may cross the site and it may be impossible or very costly to move them.

05 Look for a contractor with a good track record and plenty of experience in building basements. Appoint a professional (architect, project manager or main contractor) to be in overall control, who is willing to take ultimate responsibility for the whole project.



ADDITIONAL SPACE
Popular uses for basement spaces include home cinemas and private wine cellars, as shown by basement areas completed by Finchatton (top right and below top right)

LUXURY LIVING
Luxurious materials help create a sense of intimacy, as in rooms by The London Basement Company and Licorice Design (middle), and Tusk Interior's spa bathroom at The Halcyon development (above)



BOLD IS BEST
Bathroom (above) and bedroom (below) by Tusk Interiors at the Halcyon development, showing how bold colours work best in basement interiors

TV TIMES
Two different takes on the media/cinema room by Gregory Phillips (middle) and Karin Verzariu of Key Interiors working with Symm

increase in value has, in these cases, more than covered the construction cost. 'Of course, with the current slow down in property, who knows if that will happen, but the market does always turn around again,' she says confidently. But Phillips adds a note of caution. 'You need to be in a premium area to make money on a basement,' he warns. 'It is quite expensive to build a whole structure and stop the water getting in. It can be a time consuming project.'

Benoist says that the trend is not just based in London. 'It's happening anywhere with dense housing and high land values,' he says. Outside the cities, he is finding demand among clients with homes that are listed, in conservation areas or in locations of outstanding natural beauty, when extensions are not an option. 'To get more space, clients may be willing to excavate under the garden to create leisure areas, and they can often have plenty of natural light with ground-level roof lights,' he explains. Although Benoist finds that clients are more cautious in the current economic climate, he believes the trend is here to stay. 'As land becomes more precious, basement construction is likely to continue to be popular,' he says.

However, some London borough planners are tightening their rules on basement conversions, especially beneath listed buildings. Collapsing houses are not just urban myths: last year, a

workman died in Belgravia when the basement he was excavating collapsed, and in January, a house in Clapham fell down during basement work, injuring three people, one of them seriously. So a professional and experienced construction team is a must. 'It would be a high risk strategy not to have someone qualified in charge of the whole project,' warns Phillips.

And once it's built, how do you create the most inviting space? 'It's important to embrace what they are,' advises Finchatton's Michelin. 'People often paint basement walls white to make them light, but they end up looking cold. It's much better to create a warm room with clever lighting and opulent fabrics, then you forget that they don't have natural light.' He singles out cinema rooms with suede-covered walls and luxurious seating, wine cellars with mirrored walls and subtle lighting, and pools with black mosaics and touches of gold. Deirdre Coleman of Licorice Design, who works with The London Basement Company, believes that bolder colours are more successful. 'Basements tend to be quite angular, and they can be characterless unless you inject colour and good lighting,' she says. Bravery, they agree, is likely to be rewarded, as clients come to understand that beige is out and bold is in. 'The idea is to create something jaw-droppingly beautiful,' says Michelin *idæ*



DESIGNING DOWN

01 Lighting is crucial. Get as much natural light into the area as possible, using high level windows and light wells. An internal sunken terrace or garden, surrounded by glass walls, can create a striking feature as well as throwing daylight into the basement rooms.

02 Then plan a careful lighting scheme. Deirdre Coleman of Licorice Design recommends low level and subtle, indirect lighting that can be turned on during the day, while Rob Evans of In-toto Cheltenham opts for low energy LEDs in kitchens, such as those by Think

Lighting: 'Low ceilings and halogens don't go together - who wants to burn their head?'

03 Head height is also important. 'The lowest head height we'll do is 2.4-3m,' says Maggie Smith. 'Anything lower can feel claustrophobic.'

04 Ventilation is vital. London terraces often have front and rear windows (especially in half-basements), so the London Basement Company tend to site

living areas in the front and back to make the most of natural ventilation, with utility/shower rooms in the centre.

05 Heating is another consideration. 'Basements are usually naturally very well insulated areas, which are cool in summer and warm in winter, so less heating is required,' says Smith.

06 Maximise the sense of space. The way to do that in a

kitchen, according to Evans, is to avoid putting wall units on the narrow dimensions of the room.

07 'Everybody wants more storage within their house and there are many areas within a basement which can be utilised, so make sure none of that is wasted,' says Smith, who recommends using under-stair areas to their full. Cupboards around structural supports are another option, as

are lift-up stairs with internal storage.

08 Avoid clutter at all costs, advises Nick Lee of Thorp Design. 'The whole idea is to make the room look spacious,' he says.

The Basement Information Centre is a national centre for information about the development and use of basements in new or existing dwellings, with an online searchable database of contractors. www.basements.org.uk

Contacts

» **Finchatton** www.finchatton.co.uk » **Gregory Phillips Architects** www.gregoryphillips.com » **In-toto Cheltenham** www.intoto.co.uk » **John Evans Interior Architecture** » **Design** www.johnevaninteriordesign.com » **Key Interiors** www.keyinteriors.co.uk » **Licorice Design** www.licoricedesign.co.uk » **The London Basement Company** www.tlbc.co.uk » **Symm** www.symm.co.uk » **Think Lighting** www.think-lighting.co.uk » **Thorp Design** www.thorp.co.uk » **Tusk Interiors** www.tuskinteriors.com