

Grand designs

Nimbyism is rife among basement excavators and their neighbours, says *Mira Bar-Hillel*, but, properly constructed, they can add value without mishap

It should not take a skip falling into a hole in the road to remind people just how much activity is going on underground in central London these days – but it certainly helps concentrate the mind on the issues.

So when, one fine Saturday morning in mid-October, I was rung up by a distressed resident of Chester Row telling me about what had been going in his narrow street of listed period terraces, I realised that the subject was going to dominate the headlines in the property world – and beyond. And when, a couple of weeks later, the Evening Standard's 'skip in the hole' image was requested by Have I Got News for You, I knew I was right.

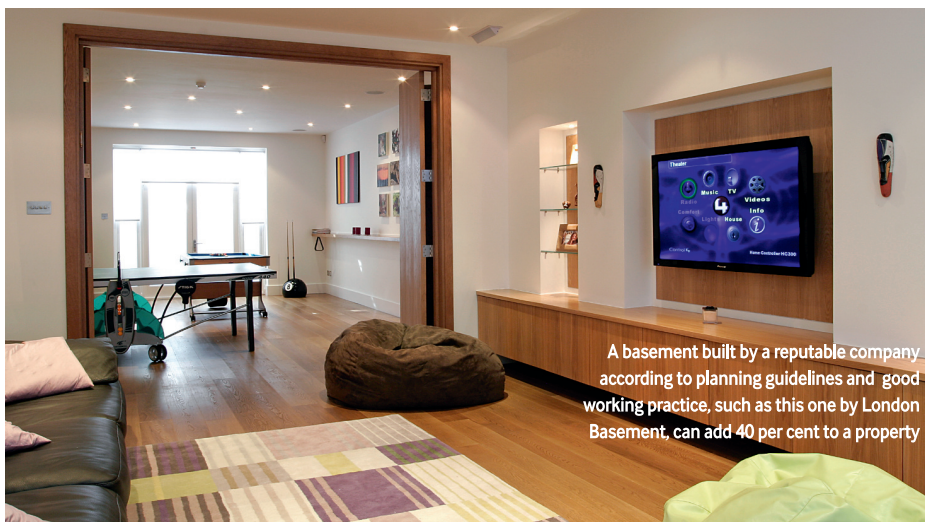
What happened in Chester Row that dawn was that a company called Finchatton, a pair of upmarket developers who seem to like being compared to the Candy brothers, were engaged in a project with the Big Basement Company, digging deep underneath the back garden of a narrow-fronted, listed terraced house. The skip was, like the excavation itself, double-depth and capable of taking 14 tonnes of weight.

Tragically, the 19th-century vaults beneath the skip were not so capable – and the skip, when heaped full of damp sand, cracked through the road and into the vaults. It damaged water pipes, causing a deal of flooding on top of the rest of the problems caused to neighbouring houses.

The story then spread from Chester Row to nearby Eaton Square, where I discovered that a sub-basement excavation proposed next door to the massive flat owned by Charles Saatchi and Nigella Lawson was driving the Domestic Goddess and her art guru hubby into putting the couple's lavish home on the market. Of course, my exposé may well make the sale very difficult if not impossible – along with the reported asking price of £36m for what is, after all, a glorified lower ground/ground floor duplex apartment.

After talking of little else for a couple of weeks to everyone from the local residents and their residents' associations to the Grosvenor Estate, which owns much of Mayfair and Belgravia, and Westminster Council, I have reached the following profound conclusion.

There are two kinds of subterranean excavations. The first kind, known as 'MINE', is



A basement built by a reputable company according to planning guidelines and good working practice, such as this one by London Basement, can add 40 per cent to a property

'There are two kinds of basement: MINE (a good thing) and YOURS (evil incarnate)'

a Good Thing. It is the product of the union of the concept of an Englishman's Castle and one's inalienable right to do whatever is possible to enhance its value. The second kind, known as 'YOURS', is Evil Incarnate. It spells months of abject misery, noise, dust and other horrors which are inescapable, unless you can afford to live elsewhere for the duration.

Another discovery was that, as I sought pithy comments from locals affected by the excavations, just as they were about to let rip, they seemed stricken by the thought that maybe – just maybe – they might wish to extend their own property in this particular way. I could almost hear the brakes being noisily applied as they started reversing into all kinds of 'on the other hand' type comments.

So much for united opposition, which would not work anyway, as Westminster Council has made it clear whose side they are on. John Walker, Westminster's operational director for development planning, says: 'We see no need to deprive our residents of the opportunity of extending their properties. Due to the density of buildings in Westminster and the concerns many residents have over the impact on their daylight by tall buildings, quite often the most

practical and least intrusive way of extending is downwards.' And indeed, when undertaken by reputable firms such as Cranbrook Basements or London Basement, the process doesn't have to be a nightmare.

Westminster Council is also claiming that government policy to relax development controls, especially underground, means they cannot reject basement applications without risking being overturned on appeal. This is true, but it doesn't explain why they refuse to adopt the 'best practice' when applying for subterranean permissions produced by Kensington & Chelsea Council in May 2009, .

This document explains that basements underneath, or attached to, listed buildings will be 'resisted', as will basements in flood risk areas, applications without detailed Construction Method Statements and those not properly supervised.

This all makes perfect sense, and had these precautions been in place at Chester Row – especially that Construction Method Statement – the disaster may easily have been averted by the simple expedient of using smaller skips.

For some reason, however, Westminster has set its face against this simple remedy. So, while basement digging continues apace, blame for the next accident may well be laid at their door. ■

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