

11.11 //



DIGGING DEEP The challenges of building below ground p16

FREEZING ASSETS Opportunities for mining in the Arctic p28

WASTE NOT Creating a sustainable future for landfill sites p36

MODUS

LAND PROPERTY CONSTRUCTION | THINKING

rics.org/modus

THE UNDERGROUND ISSUE

:ICEBERG HOMES

BASEMENT EXTENSIONS CAN DOUBLE THE SIZE AND VALUE OF A PROPERTY

David Cameron, Ricky Gervais, Roman Abramovich and Jemima Khan all have one. Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone has planning permission for one, and footballer Frank Lampard is facing opposition from his neighbours because he wants one. It seems that, these days, anyone who is anyone has a basement extension.

These 'mega basements' are in a different league to the customary loft extension. Some actually double the size of the house above. And, while they may sound like a private matter for the homeowner, they are causing a public furor.

Basement excavations are becoming popular throughout the UK, particularly in cities such as Bath where terraced houses leave little room for extensions. But the nation's retrofitting hotspot is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) in London, which has reportedly received some 600 planning applications for basements since 2006.

'Families are growing but people don't want to spend money on moving due to the financial climate,' says Maggie Smith of specialist builder London Basement. 'Also, many want to stay in the area because of schools, so they decided to extend what they've already got.' It's also about keeping up with the Joneses. 'We have built 10 basements in a single road before because after one person did it, the others wanted it.'

Retrofitting a basement can boost the value of a house hugely – even double it – and buyers are increasingly interested in properties that offer the potential for extension. And it need not be dark and cramped, thanks to light wells and engineering techniques that allow rooms of up to 3m in height, says Smith.

So why the controversy? Fears about the overall stability of land due to the digging frenzy have been allayed by a 2009 report by Ove Arup, commissioned by RBKC

council. It found that the basement trend did not pose a risk, pointing out that the area had survived the construction of the significantly bigger Tube network. 'Very few of these basements cause problems to other buildings,' agrees Alistair Redler FRICS of Delva Patman Associates. 'The main problem is disturbance by the general building project, which applies to all work.'

Residents are launching campaigns, such as the Considerate Basement Development Group, against specific proposed projects. 'It can be truly horrific. Existing buildings are being shaken to pieces and huge conveyor belts are set up to transport earth to the street and into skips. Then you have the skips and lorries,' says Terrence Bendixson, secretary for planning at residents' association the Chelsea Society. 'Frequently, the owner of the house sees reason to move out but the neighbours are left to suffer.'

While campaigners concede that banning retrofitting would be unworkable, they are calling

for a number of improvements. 'We would like to see scrupulous care taken over engineering to prevent deaths and collapses, and stronger controls over the construction methods used,' says James Thompson of the King's Road Association of Chelsea Residents. He adds that party wall agreements, which require compensation in case of damage to a neighbouring house when a house is 'laid open', can be applied to basement retrofit jobs. 'Often surveyors are unaware that this facility can be used, so we would like them to start using PWAs,' he says.

'The Party Wall Act is an excellent piece of legislation, and its unique dispute resolution mechanism deals very well with the structural design and execution of works,' adds Redler. 'The new RICS Party Walls Guidance Note focuses on best practice to ensure that high standard is maintained in the future.'

The RICS Party Walls Guidance Note 6th Edition was released in October. Visit rics.org/partywalls.



Retrofitting a basement creates extra space and has become a viable alternative to relocating

