

Digging in: the battle of the basements

Well-to-do Londoners are at odds over subterranean extensions – and now Parliament is weighing in, explains **Christopher Middleton**

London is in a state of trench warfare. Unable to sell their homes, or discouraged by the cost of moving, more and more capital-dwellers are digging both into their pockets and the earth beneath their homes to install increasingly ambitious basements.

The trend has been growing for years, but the disturbance to neighbours has reached such a pitch the Government is trying to take action. The Subterranean Development Bill, proposed by Lord Selsdon and passed by the House of Lords last week, seeks to restrict the havoc wrought by these underground extravaganzas.

But he's got an uphill struggle on his hands, and not just because private members' bills frequently disappear down a parliamentary black hole. Underground rooms provide shelter not just from the meteorological elements, but from the economic chill.

Basement-builders calculate that by constructing a subterranean extension, they can both achieve greater square footage for less money than it would cost to move house and, with some luck, at least recoup the construction costs when the time eventually comes to sell.

The trouble is that while they get a lovely new living space, the neighbours have to listen to a relentless three-to-six-month excavation and extraction period. Residual resentment can run high.

All over London, there are streets where a virtual state of war exists between home owners who have gone down the basement route, and those who deplore those who do.

By definition, those battlefields are located in the most prosperous parts of town. The Prime Minister's own father-in-law, Viscount Astor, has given his hearty backing to the Subterranean Development Bill after the ordeal-by-basement he suffered close to his Belgravia residence upon the arrival of new Russian owners.

"The builders appeared, and they dug, and they dug, and they dug," he declared. "I have no idea how far they dug, but the result was that both houses on either side initially collapsed into the hole, causing enormous inconvenience to them."

Another high-priced area which has seen clashes is the Toast Rack, just off Wandsworth Common. Two years ago, mud flew back and forth as residents foretold of foundation collapse due to wall-to-wall basement constructions, such as the three-homes-in-a-row project in Mimosa Street (one of which is owned by television property presenter Phil Spencer).

For sale: homes with great basements

Brighton

The upper floors have views of the sea, and the basement contains a cinema, in this Brunswick Square mansion. £2.8m, Winkworth (01273 320300; www.winkworth.co.uk).



Fulham

Five-storey family home, joined by a glass stairwell and with a gym and exercise area in the basement. £3m, Douglas and Gordon (0207 731 4391; www.douglasandgordon.com).



Alderley Edge

The basement of this six-bedroom house has been turned into a suite with bar, wine cellar and cinema. £2.95m, Jackson-Stops and Staff (01625 540340; www.jackson-stops.co.uk).



Chester

Four-bedroom canalside cottage, where the large basement is used for bedrooms. £495,000, Strutt and Parker (01244 354880; www.struttandparker.com).



Underground resistance: Viscount Astor, left, is frustrated with building work caused by basement refurbishments, above



At the centre of the dispute was a fear that a glut of basements would upset the water table. "I don't think there is any reason for people to be anxious," declared Spencer, describing the water table worry as "not quite an urban myth, but something approaching it".

He was supported by a 57-page report produced by Arup Geotechnics for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Entitled the Draft Scoping Study, this document made it clear that water table concerns were misplaced.

Nevertheless, this didn't stop them from bubbling to the surface in upmarket Templewood Avenue in Hampstead, where residents urged Camden Council to pull the plug on a one-and-a-half-storey-high basement in a building once owned by the Polish ambassador.

It's not the only grand scheme like this. At the high end, there seems to be no end to the possibilities of what ambitious home owners can achieve underground. A home in West London recently had a three floor basement installed with a pool, entertaining area and living room, which also doubles as a panic room. And in June of last year, plans were submitted for a £50 million basement addition to Witanhurst, an 18th-century mansion in Highgate, that would more than double the house's already ample size.

Part of the problem with the new basements, of course, is the knowledge that the more spectacular the project, the more money the home owner is likely to make.

"We reckon that to excavate, support and get a basement up to ready-to-decorate status, it costs around £300 per square foot," says Maggie Smith of London Basements (formerly The London Basement Company).

According to Jeremy Best of John D Wood in Wandsworth, a really impressive basement can add 15 to 20 per cent to the value of a house in the Toast Rack. "Whereas a house round here without a basement can go for £3 million, a house with a basement will sell for £3.5 to £3.6 million."

Provided it's the right kind of basement, that is. Some 90 per cent of the London Basements schemes are commissioned not by upwardly mobile urban singletons, but by parents wanting to make room for their growing families. This is the kind of space that fetches top dollar, says Best.

"The secret is not to produce some big, empty room that looks like a dance studio, but to use it as a rumpus room for the kids, with a big-screen TV and all their toys, as well as for relocated working areas like the kitchen, utility or laundry rooms," he says.

It's the way of the future, says television's

Restoration Man George Clarke, who appears on the London Basements website to speak about the benefits of burrowing. "Instead of moving house and wasting money on stamp duty and legal fees, you can stay where you are and invest in what you've got," he says.

"In the past, we imagined basements or cellars as being dingy little rooms. Now you can get natural light into all those spaces, and go down two or even three levels."

The disrupted denizens of Chelsea and Wandsworth will keep complaining, no doubt, whatever the fate of the Subterranean Development Bill. But with prime London prices set to keep growing for the foreseeable future, it will take more than a well-connected Viscount to halt the fast-growing new city beneath our feet.

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