

GOING underground

MIKE WISEMAN DIRECTOR, THE BASEMENT DESIGN STUDIO

WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD HOMES?

From the age of seven we lived in a 1960s ex-council house in Holyport near Maidenhead, which my parents had bought from the council and extended. Mum was a secretary, dad was a building control officer and I have one brother. We had our own bedrooms, all decorated in typical 1970s style with heavily patterned brown carpets and curtains. I remember this being huge, but having been back since, I can't believe it's the same house!

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GET INTO ARCHITECTURE?

My dad definitely influenced my decision because he taught me how to draw floorplans. From the age of 14, I would produce plans for extensions and porches, and knew that was what I wanted to do. Going to university wasn't so easy back then, so at the age of 18 I got a job with an architectural practice in Maidenhead who were prepared to take me on and pay to send me to night school and day release. I'm an MCIAT – a Member of the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists – by profession, and back then my work was mainly commercial, designing stores for companies like Great Universal and C&A.

When I was still at school I'd done two weeks of work experience for the oldest architectural practice in the country, founded in 1856 and based in Windsor at the back of the Royal Mews. I loved their work and my aim had always been to work for this practice. After two years of applying for various positions I managed to get a job with them and worked there for the next 10 years. I was involved in commercial projects and historic renovations in the town, and every day I'd watch out of the window as the guards would march up the High Street to the castle, accompanied by a band.

I set up my own practice in the early 1990s, taking on more residential projects when commercial work dried out during the recession. At first I couldn't get my head around how small some houses had to be in order to fit their plots because I was used to designing more spacious buildings.

WHAT'S THE MOST INTERESTING PART OF YOUR JOB?

I enjoy running an entire project, seeing it through from design to completion – taking a few scribbled ideas and actually making it work. The technical aspect has always interested me, and I like getting stuck into the nitty gritty. People still



Mike Wiseman

is a chartered architectural technologist with over 30 years experience in private practice, working in private, residential and commercial sectors. He formed his own practice in 1990 and became involved in basement design in 1996. Mike was key to the development and success of The London Basement Company and was appointed as Design Director in 2003. London Basement is now the leading basement specialist company in the capital – expert in basement excavation, conversion and construction, with over 1,000 basement conversions completed to date. He has unrivalled experience in all aspects of basement planning, design, specification and detailing, and recently formed The Basement Design Studio – an architectural practice specialising in the design of bespoke basements.

think of basements as dark and dingy spaces but you can get an amazing amount of light and ventilation through a well designed lightwell. Something really modest and inoffensive on the outside can make a big difference inside.

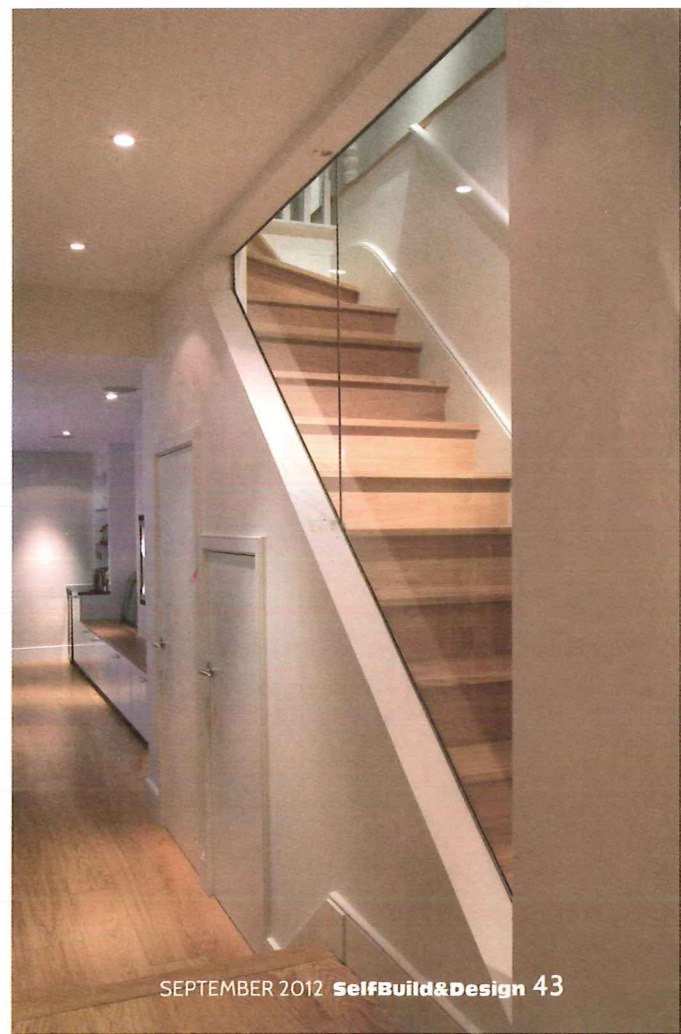
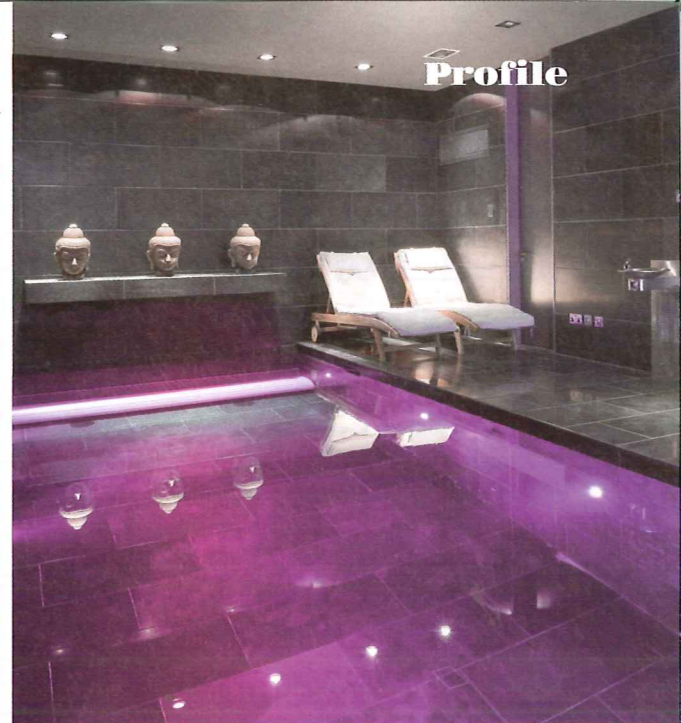
HOW DID YOU COME TO SPECIALISE IN BASEMENTS?

In 1996 I met the founder of London Basement on the golf course. The company had just started up, and I was invited to submit their very first planning application for a basement. I'd never designed one before and needed to research the whole process from scratch, so it was a real learning curve, but equally none of the councillors or planning officers knew anything about basements either because back then the idea of digging out a new space beneath a house to create a room was still quite unusual in this country. It's amazing how much the industry has advanced in recent years, and I've been involved in literally hundreds of basement projects and planning applications since then – becoming the design director at London Basement, and then in 2009 setting up an offshoot practice, The Basement Design Studio.

Originally people chose basements as alternatives to extending their homes or moving, and in many ways these are the nicest kinds of project. As soon as a basement is added the dynamics of the house change completely in a way that people have described as life-changing. Nowadays basements seem to be chosen for more commercial reasons, to make money, and the designs can be really lavish. They seem to be all about gyms, swimming pools, bars and home cinemas, and we've worked with a number of celebrities on their own basement projects. One current design is over 900m² in size and tunnels under the entire house and garden, and another fills the whole footprint of the site – stretching under the front garden, the house and the rear garden.

This type of monster development has caused some concerns about things like noise, disruption to neighbouring foundations and soil erosion, which can make planning permission much more difficult to achieve in London for average people. There are now specific policies in

“Building a brand new house creates the perfect opportunity to include a basement.”



Down under wonders

ABOVE: A glass floor makes a stunning entrance to this period home in Chelsea, with views down into the basement lightwell below and metal grilles providing ventilation.

RIGHT: Excavating a basement creates the opportunity to extend living space with a new kitchen or living room, or to include more luxurious areas such as a dedicated home cinema or fashionable 'wellness' suite with a swimming pool.

LEFT: This compact external courtyard/lightwell has a spiral staircase for access to the garden above.

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place against subterranean development, and a bill has been introduced to Parliament called the Subterranean Development Bill to establish a code of practice and regulate such underground development. I argue that these projects are 'green', because they take up no amenity space, re-use existing land and are well insulated, but I do worry how basement developments are going to go in the future.

DESCRIBE YOUR OWN HOME

I live in a lovely little village which just has a pub and cricket pitch. Our cottage is down a lane with only two neighbours, surrounded by fields in the Green Belt. We're on chalk, so digging down to create a basement extension would have been expensive, but we ended up buying the cottage next door about four years ago and knocking through to make one house. There are still separate services and two staircases, so they could be split into two properties again in the future.

If I could build a dream house it would be quite modern and minimal – Frank Lloyd Wright style architecture – because I've done the chintzy cottage style with small windows. I could make do with a few boys' toys, some large sliding glass doors and great views.



WHAT TIPS WOULD YOU OFFER TO PEOPLE PLANNING THEIR OWN BASEMENTS?

Always use someone with previous experience of converting basements because a man and van just won't be up to the job. There have been a couple of high profile incidents where houses have disappeared into holes and skips have suddenly sunk into the road, which could be disastrous. What we do to retrofit a basement is completely different to someone building a new house.

Building a brand new house creates the perfect opportunity to include a basement, and is fairly standard in other European countries. People needing deep foundations are almost there anyway, and developers are starting to realise that they're a great use of land. The key things are structure and waterproofing, which requires specialist advice.

TELL US AN INTERESTING FACT ABOUT YOURSELF

Cars and planes are my passion. I've got five garages and spend a lot of time out there tinkering with my classic cars, including a 1953 American Willy's Jeep for the summer and a Porsche 911. Twelve years ago I decided to learn to fly a plane, and now co-own a Cessna 172. I often wish I'd been an airline pilot – going up in the sky instead of under the ground!

Contacts

The Basement Design Studio

www.basementdesignstudio.co.uk

London Basement www.londonbasement.co.uk

Going down

ABOVE: This contemporary multi-functional new basement was created in a traditional double-fronted Victorian house in Clapham, and has been designed for fun and relaxation for the whole family.

LEFT: This traditional listed building was given a whole new lease of life with a stunning modern basement opening onto a courtyard lightwell through folding/sliding glass doors.

RIGHT: Small-paned windows are echoed in the basement level of this traditional Chelsea house, and the existing staircase was copied to create the impression that the lower level has always existed.

