



# The Essential Guide to **Home** Improvement

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**George Clarke's top tips** on  
creating space in your home



Plan your project • Choose and work with a contractor • Useful advice



# Going underground

If you can't extend outwards or upwards, then you may well be able to expand your home below ground, whether you have a pre-existing basement/ cellar or not. Older style properties are ideal, although it is still entirely feasible in many modern properties. Here's how to do it.

If you live in an older house, built before the Second World War, then a basement or cellar extension may be a good way to increase your living space. So why are older properties best suited to this kind of conversion? "The majority of older properties, built prior to the 1950s, are ideal for a basement conversion/construction because many of the properties are constructed with a timber suspended floor over a sub-floor void, says Maggie Smith, of London Basement. "This means we can carry out the construction of the basement from outside, by excavating in the front garden, below the front window, breaking through below ground, putting in the necessary supports and excavating/underpinning below the property, while our clients carry on living in the property, with minimal disruption."

But don't despair if your home has a concrete floor, as there may still be options. "This is also often possible when a property has a solid concrete floor, dependent upon the construction of the floor, as we at London Basement have

actually pioneered a method of working below solid floors," adds Maggie.

Burrowing underground might sound like the perfect way to extend without annoying the neighbours, or even having to apply for planning consent, but that's not strictly true, Maggie points out. "If you want lightwells/windows in your basement, which is really recommended to provide natural light and air, then you will require planning permission, plus of course you will have to comply with building regulations. Party Wall Awards are also required if you are within three metres of your neighbour's property. Your specialist contractor should be able to help you with these things, as well as dealing with the utility companies where necessary," Maggie says.

"Another benefit of working with a specialist such as London Basement is that our clients don't require an architect, as we can submit all planning applications and carry out the full detailed design and the structural engineering element," Maggie points out.



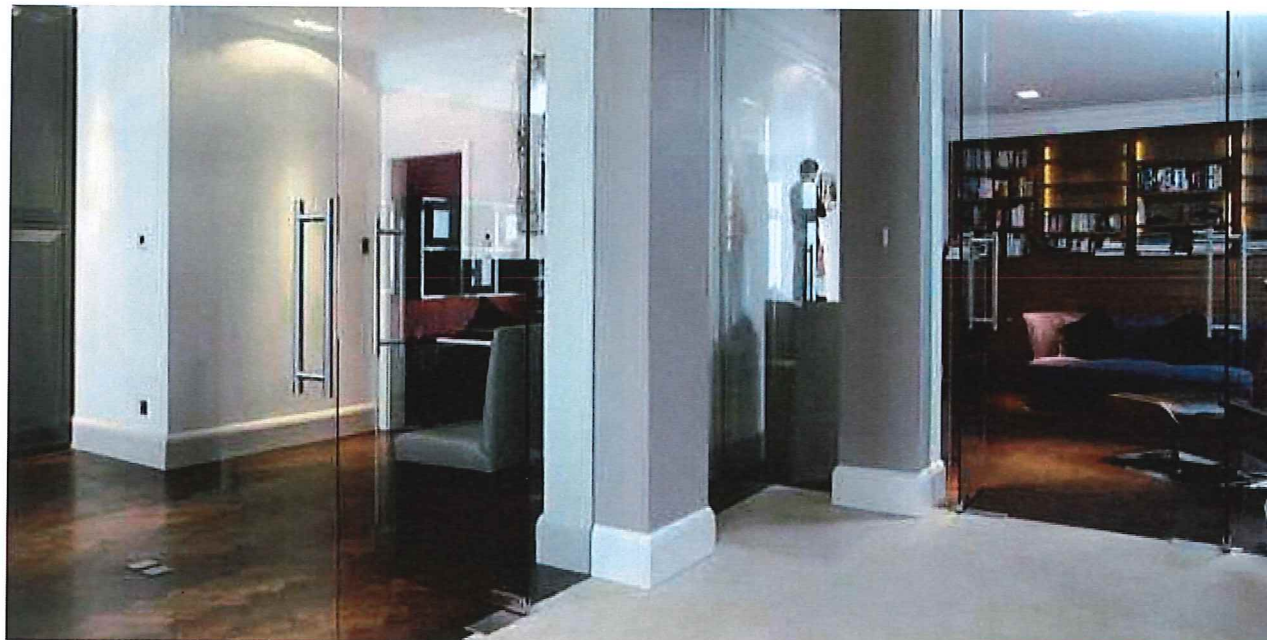
So what are the practicalities you need to worry about? How about stairs and fire exits? Plumbing and drainage? Natural light? Will you lose heat from the property, and can you add energy-saving measures while converting? Plan for these at the design stage, and make sure you cover all eventualities, advises Maggie: "If you are using a basement specialist, all of these practicalities will be taken care of as part of the design, ie fire exits are provided by installing a ladder in the wall of the lightwell and, even if the lightwell has a grille over it, there would be a lockable hatch in the grille through which you could escape."



Not everyone would think of doubling up their lightwells and fire escape, but it's a neat little design tweak. "Bay windows, generally in the front, are taken down into the basement and lightwells can also be provided at the rear or side, which can be covered by glass/grilles and these all provide good natural light," adds Maggie. "Internal lighting is important and downlighters provide the best form of light internally. Most of our clients are very surprised at how bright a basement actually is, even without the lights on."

"It is thermally efficient, particularly with the use of under floor heating, although some clients prefer radiators."





Many of our clients have told us that the temperature in a basement is perfect – cool in the summer and warm in winter."

Choosing a contractor with some experience in this area would be a sensible move, then? Maggie couldn't agree more: "Some builders may quote a much cheaper price to deliver a basement, but once they start work they soon realise that they are not up to it, as it is a very specialised field.

"When obtaining quotes, ask to see some basements that the company has constructed. Try to use a company that have plenty of experience and history, as there are a lot of companies 'jumping on the bandwagon' trying to win work in what they imagine to be a very lucrative field, so you need to know that you have the best when you are dealing with the foundations of your property.

"You should speak up immediately if you feel that there is a problem or if you want to make changes, before things progress too far," cautions Maggie. "Every project should have a project manager who is in regular contact and can respond to any problems straight away. Once again, it is imperative to know that you have a company with a good few years experience and then there should not be any concerns."

It seems a basement conversion could be a lot of hassle. How do you know your project will all be worth it in the end? "Any building works bring some hassle, but with the right company this can be minimised, as long as there is a good dialogue," says Maggie. "The vast majority of our clients say it is more than worthwhile in the end when they have a whole new floor level to live in!"

And what about a contingency fund to carry out a project of this nature – surely there are many more "hidden" problems you can run into when you're digging under the foundations of your home? "There are some things that cannot be foreseen," agrees Maggie. "Although when a company like ours has built more than 1,000 basements and has worked on most styles of property, these risks can be minimised.

"Occasionally we can come across a concrete mass below ground that will slow down the works while it is broken down and that will incur extra cost – and once we found a well, which we worked around and still constructed the basement. Unfortunately, there is no way of finding out what is below ground until we start digging, but occurrences like this are rare."

**London Basement** is an FMB member company based in Isleworth, Middlesex. Visit their website at [www.londonbasement.co.uk](http://www.londonbasement.co.uk) to find out more and to talk about your project.

## A PROPER GROUNDING

Maggie Smith of London Basement has the following expert advice to anyone thinking of carrying out this kind of project:

- Find an **established and reputable company** with plenty of experience in both structural and waterproofing works, both of which are key.
- Give **careful thought** to what rooms you create to make the new floor level more versatile, ie in addition to the living/play/games space you want, a utility room can double up as a kitchenette, plus a bathroom means it can provide guest space, with a study or home office doubling as a guest room. These things will also mean you don't have to keep running upstairs every time you want a cup of tea!
- Once you have completed your new basement level, you can maybe **think about reconfiguring the ground floor** level, to make the whole area work better together.
- **Keep neighbours on side** by talking to them in advance, so that they are aware of what you propose and don't find out from the party wall surveyor/planning submission.

