

The wind-blown plastic documents hang off every other railing in the centre of town. Seeking additional space but unable to afford to move, Londoners are doing the only thing they can: dig. It was once back extensions and skylights that warranted that plastic folder advising neighbours of building work, but now they contain detailed plans for three-storey subterranean caverns, some of them bigger than the houses above. In fact, the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea has approved 616 underground schemes in the past 27 months. 'We don't let people build up or back so people are going down,' says Daniel Moylan, the council's deputy leader.

Robin Knowles of the London Basement Company, whose sign is omnipresent in the tree-lined streets of Central London, says he has 35 to 40 projects on the go. The motives are simple. 'People don't want to move. They don't want to pay stamp duty or rent or removal men. They actually like their houses but need room to spread out in.'

The economics also favour digging: 'The average price of construction per square foot in London is £200 to £300,' he says. 'But the average cost of a house per square foot in Central London is £500 to £1,500. You do the maths.' Some clients already have and the numbers came out well in their favour. 'One client bought a house in St John's Wood for £2 million a few years ago, dug down under the whole length of the house and the back garden and later sold it for £9 million,' he says. 'You more than double your money. It's better than anything else you can do.'

It also, he warns, requires proper tunnelling

and engineering work. But though wine cellars, subterranean gyms, home cinemas, swimming pools and plant rooms (increasingly necessary as houses go hi-tech) may seem appealing to their owners, they create havoc with the neighbours. In Notting Hill, the situation between Ronnie Cohen (a financier and adviser to Gordon Brown), who is building an underground swimming pool, hot tub and steam room designed by Norman Foster across 10,000ft beneath Stanley Crescent, and his neighbours has deteriorated completely. The builders have already dug down 20ft and excavated hundreds of tons of earth. Neighbours complain that their houses are caked in mud and they can't even walk on the pavement. The noise has been so oppressive that Cohen is now paying for a neighbour, the writer Bella Pollen, to work elsewhere.

Architects now routinely plan excavations. 'The standard Michaelis Boyd basement project these days starts in the front, goes underneath the house and up into the garden,' says an irate neighbour who lives four houses down from a Michaelis project and had to endure years of noise.

'Architects love basements because they add £700,000 to the cost of the job [the average price for basements in Notting Hill starts at £500,000 and goes into multiples of millions on top of the cost of refurbishment] but I don't think it's worth it because of the neighbours' reaction. It's a real shock to see a 30ft hole next door to you. There's a lawsuit on my street that has been going on for two and a half years. Of course it's your house and you can do what you want but the flipside is how you want to

handle relationships with the neighbours.'

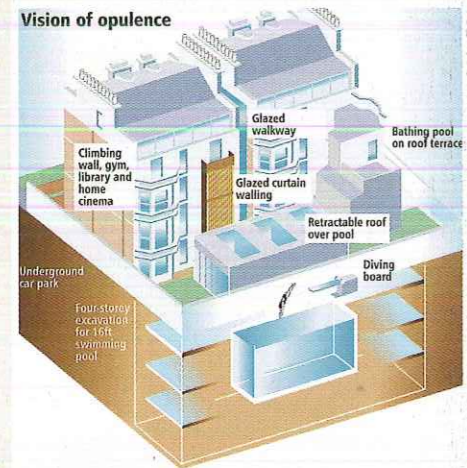
Excavations do go wrong. One house in Maida Vale collapsed into the hole next door. The excavation was under way when a neighbour noticed a crack forming on his wall. The structural engineer was called and immediately demanded that the family abandon the house. It collapsed into the next-door hole shortly afterwards. 'Houses fall over all the time,' says architect Tom Young, who has designed many basements in Central London, 'and there are endless lawsuits. But you should see basements as a positive trend. They keep people from moving to the suburbs and deserting London.'

And there is good news for deep dwellers. In the event of an earthquake, the world will be divided between those with reinforced cement basements and those without.

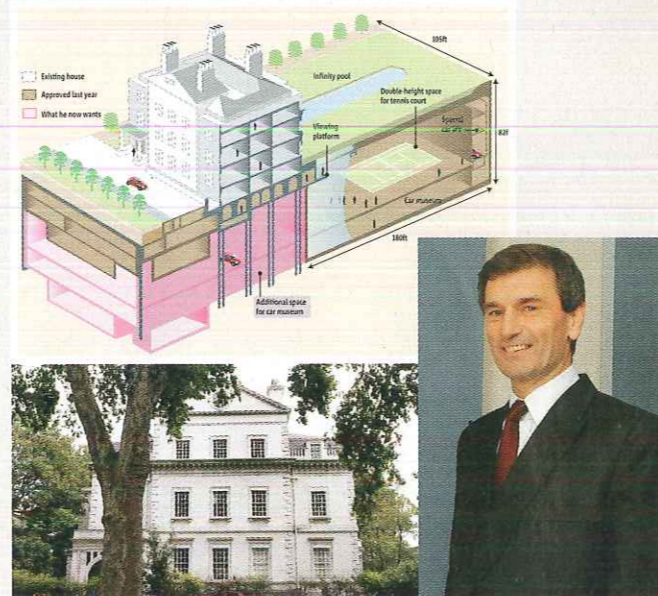
Why move house, when you can dig down and create an underground wonderland beneath the pavement?

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

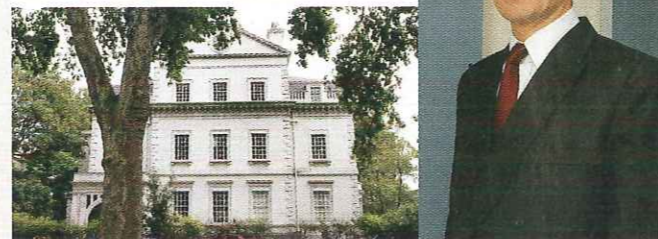
GRAND DESIGNS The Londoners who want it all (including a car museum, subterranean tennis court and diving pool)



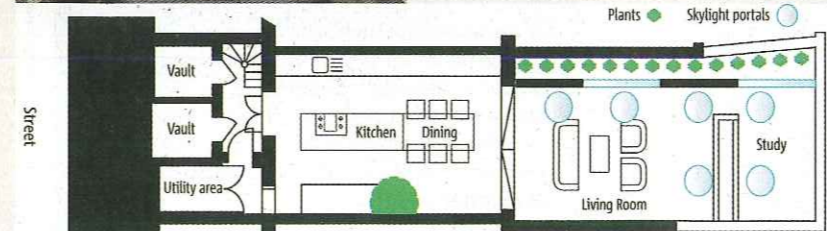
CHRIS ROKOS
The hedge fund tycoon plans a climbing wall, cinema, swimming pool and 16ft-deep diving pool under his Notting Hill house and garden. The 168-page application, the longest in the history of K&C council, will cost £20 million. Consent was granted on condition that he provide £500,000 towards low-cost housing.



JON HUNT
The founder of Foxtons, who sold the company in 2007 for £390 million, is planning a five-storey extension under the front and back gardens of his eight-bedroom home in Kensington Palace Gardens. This means digging down more than 80ft, stretching 180ft into the back garden and 65ft out at the front to create a car museum, tennis court and car lift. The design statement that accompanied the planning requirements said: 'The proposal will create an appealing museum/gallery in which to view the artefacts... displaying the vintage cars as pieces of art.'



PETER KENYON
Chelsea Football Club chief executive Peter Kenyon plans to extend his £2 million Georgian townhouse in Notting Hill with a basement almost the length of the 33ft garden. He and his wife intend to add an underground kitchen, dining room, study and living room and use ceiling portholes to let in daylight. The plan was approved, despite neighbours' complaints. In certain councils, applications for everything from adult playrooms to teenage discotheques and chill-out spaces are everyday occurrences.



Alex Lentati/Sunday Telegraph; Oliver Lim/Empics; Alamy