




The top makeover is below ground

Despite disapproval from neighbours, more people are digging a basement



A basement and ground-floor extension on a house in Wandsworth, southwest London

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We are fast becoming a nation of hobbits, burrowing down to create space for our children, dogs and relatives. Despite the well-publicised concerns about basement digging, more people are staying put and diverting what they would have spent on moving, on improving — below ground.

Applications to build or extend basements have increased by 9 per cent across the UK, between 2013 and 2015, according to research by Direct Line, the insurance company. The majority, 75 per cent, of basement conversions are in London where the number of projects increased by 11 per cent. In 2015 there were almost 1,500 planning applications to excavate basements.



The basement extension in Wandsworth was designed by the architectural firm Qualitas

Other areas of the country where basements are increasing in popularity include southeast England, the West Midlands, northwest England, northeast England and Wales — although admittedly some of these are from a low base. For instance there were only three applications for basement conversions in Wales in 2015; it was the area with the fewest basement builds. In some areas basement conversions are decreasing in popularity, including in Scotland and the east Midlands.

The decision to dig deep is closely linked to increasing stamp duty fees, high land values and a lack of available space, so they are most popular in big cities.

Rebecca Wakefield, the creative director at Banda Property, has calculated — by looking at expenditure versus the value of the property — that it doesn't make sense to excavate a basement on a house worth less than £1 million. In terms of adding value other improvements, including extensions and loft conversions, are a better option for smaller homes.



A basement kitchen in a mews house in South Kensington, west London, by the architect De Rosee Sa

According to the Direct Line data almost all planning applications for basement conversions are successful; in most areas 70 to 80 per cent were approved, and in northwest England this rose to 90 per cent. Jonathan Plant, the managing director of Lipton Plant Architects, says: "Planning departments are catching up with the trend and drawing up policies on basement conversions. We now have to do a lot more engineering assessments to show the impact of an excavation. It is important because people are worried that their house will fall down if the neighbour digs a basement, though often it is the opposite; Victorian houses are built on such shallow foundations that the underpinning on the new basement will help next door too."

Qualitas, an architectural and building company, has had the number of basement projects it carries out in London rise by 30 per cent and the average spend increase by 50 per cent. Nick Woodworth and Jonathan Woodcock, the co-directors, say: "Stamp duty is a prime driver, but clients are also thinking holistically about their families — they have the kids settled in the local school and their friends and family near by. A basement allows them to stay put for an extra five to ten years."

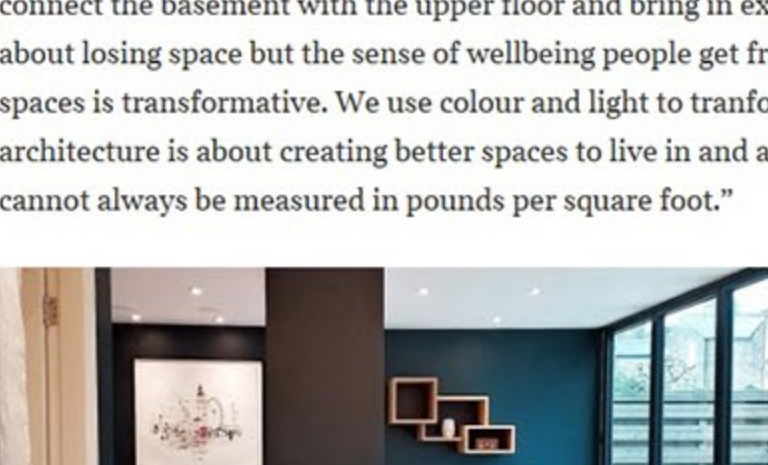


An extension by Lipton Plant Architects in Crouch End, north London

Woodworth adds: "Many people will have already done a loft extension, they'll then do a kitchen extension and then think about the basement; about 40 per cent will do everything at once." Most commonly people will use the basement for a family room — play room for smaller children, media room for older ones — a spare bedroom with en suite bathroom and utility room.

Plant says: "As property prices rise, doing a basement conversion makes more sense. These schemes are getting bigger and more ambitious. Although the ability to bring in natural light and ventilate well is crucial to the design. If you can get those two, you can create large kitchen and living spaces in the basement; if not, it has to be more about play dens, media rooms and utility rooms."

Typically these basement conversions aren't dark subterranean worlds but are lit by light wells and open out on to gardens. Woodworth and Woodcock also like to use glass boxes set into the pavement or lawn to bring light down. Plant says that, ideally, he likes to use a double-height space at the back of the property to connect the basement with the upper floor and bring in extra light. "People worry about losing space but the sense of wellbeing people get from double-height spaces is transformative. We use colour and light to transform homes; architecture is about creating better spaces to live in and adding value that cannot always be measured in pounds per square foot."



An extension and basement in Battersea, southwest London, by Qualitas

Max de Rosee, the co-founder of the De Rosee Sa architectural practice, says that where traditional light wells and doors opening on to gardens are not an option, it can be a challenge to get light into a basement in a mews. "We use the stairwell, internal floor lights and glazed panels in the ceiling to borrow light from the storey above," he says. People are also using Crittall glass interior doors to bring light through the house, he adds.

There is some continuity, though, in how people want their new basements and extensions with defined living spaces taking over from large open-plan expanses, exposed brickwork and panelled walls making a comeback, and the use of retro fittings such as Crittall windows and doors becoming more popular.