

within these walls

*"Deceptively" large houses often have a great deal of scope
in the attic and cellar*

Most of us live in an inverted 'Tardis' with the outside of our house looking deceptively large and generous while the inside is often small and overcrowded. Despite the past price slump, for most of us, our home still represents our biggest and best investment. It is also the one that is most likely to give pleasure and satisfaction. It is only sensible to maximise the benefit from that investment and the easiest way is to bring into profitable use the under-utilised assets such as the lofts and cellars which are normally the undisturbed homes of spiders, beetles and other creepy crawlies.

Before embarking on the conversion of a loft or cellar you have to ask yourself one question; will the conversion of the space provide me with a significant benefit at a reasonable cost? It is essential to seek professional advice from the appropriate sources such as architect, surveyor, estate agent and structural engineer, to evaluate that decision. Failure to do so may involve you in an expensive building operation to little advantage.

You have to consider whether the resultant increase in your property value will be worth the building cost and the use that you will gain from the space. You will need to know whether it is structurally possible to achieve without involving major structural alterations like underpinning and new foundations.

You will also need the benefit of an architect to assist you with the design of the building. A poorly designed roof extension, if it detracts from the appearance of the building, could even have a detrimental effect on the property's value.

If the loft conversion involves the creation of a habitable room rather than the provision of storage space it will have to comply with Local Authority Building Regulations. These are designed to provide the occupier with a building that can be used safely. They control all aspects of construction, but those particularly relevant to loft conversions

are as follows: A safe means of escape for the new room, structural stability in relation to the strength of the floor and increased loads imposed on the existing party and internal walls and, finally, insulation and ventilation. If there is sufficient space to provide an additional



bathroom then the regulations affecting sanitary installations apply. Alternatively, should the use of space be restricted to storage, then most of these regulations do not apply. However, it will still be necessary to strengthen the new floor serving the loft, as well as considering the implications of the increased load on the party and spine walls.

Another important consideration is whether planning permission or Listed Building Consent will need to be given by the local authority. If the building is listed it is important to get expert advice from a Historic Building architect before embarking on any alteration either internally or externally. When unlisted buildings are located in a Conservation Area it is important to consult the local authority on what permission or consent is required for the proposals. If the property is a conventional building it is not normally necessary to obtain planning permission if the conversion of the loft space simply involves the use of the space within the existing roof envelope and the installation of a few skylights.

Using only the existing roof space does not always provide sufficient headroom. The best way to resolve this is to build up the rear part of the roof, but retain the front slope and insert a dormer window. Because this involves building up on the party walls it will be necessary not only to get planning permission but also the Building Regulation Consent. In addition, it will be necessary to agree a Party Wall Award with both your neighbours who jointly own the party walls. They can't prevent you building up the party walls but they can insist on certain safeguards so that the stability of the wall is not affected by your works.

Once you have hurdled all the obstacles which may sound daunting but are easily overcome with professional assistance, you are next faced with the choice of builders. If the conversion involves building up party walls it will probably take about three months, so it is important that you are happy with the way the builder works. The most upsetting aspect of carrying out building work is normally the dirt and mess involved. Just as it is impossible to cook without breaking eggs, it is impossible to build without creating dust. Talk to your builder. Temporary walls of studwork

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and polythene can be erected which, when combined with simple agreements to carry out cleaning work at the end of each day, will avoid arguments and disappointment.

Cellars, like lofts, can also provide either storage space or additional habitable rooms. Again it very much depends on the existing size and height of the cellar. The same requirements regarding building consent and planning permission may apply if the proposed conversion involves the creation of a habitable room with new windows in the external walls.

The conversion of cellars is far more expensive per square foot than the conversion of lofts. This is principally attributable to the expense of carrying out 'tanking' and/or waterproofing of the basement walls and floor. In addition, if there is insufficient headroom and you wish to lower the floor, it may be necessary to underpin the walls, an expensive operation best avoided unless it is also being carried out for other reasons, such as remedying settlement

problems. Cellars, if they can be converted economically, have a variety of uses such as wine cellars and general storage, games and health rooms or even bathrooms and sauna.

A carefully planned loft or cellar conversion provides you with an opportunity to improve the value of your home and increasing its space without the discomfort and inconvenience of having to move to a bigger house. ■

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