



Project design and construction: Ian Hill (studiopentaher.com); Photographer: P. P. Rhee

Making the best of what you've got

Having decided that it may be a good idea to improve your lifestyle by making alterations to your home, the next step is to take a critical look at the opportunities the building can offer. The chances are that there are several options open to you, although some of them may not be obvious at the start. At this point advice from an architect could be very helpful. Contrary to the popular mythology about the profession, many architects enjoy the challenge of solving the problems presented by domestic design and their fees are relatively cheap compared with other professionals, such as solicitors, estate agents and builders. Apart from giving you an idea of what would be practical and cost-effective the right architect (to find one see the section later on building professionals) will also be able to offer an objective view of the alternatives.

Choosing the type of home alteration

There is an array of options that you can follow to improve your home, some of which may be due only cursory consideration, but make a list of all possibilities, even if some are crossed off it after brief consideration. Sometimes what seems to meet your needs is obvious but careful thought given to the alternatives at this early planning stage can save time and money further down the line. Later in this book a section looks at the design options for the choices below in greater detail.

Reorganise

Once you start to visualise the many ways that you can start altering and adding to your home, it can be quite exciting. As you start to talk to architects and builders, they will no doubt share your enthusiasm for spending your money with them. But before you get too far, try to take a step back and ask whether you can achieve something that suits your requirements without getting caught up in major building works. Most designers know that when you are planning a house, the easiest way to solve many of the design problems encountered along the way is by adding extra space (and therefore cost) to the floor plan. Occasionally this is

the only option, but it is possible that a little skilled thinking will produce more effective, more economic answers.

Add an extension

A logical response to a lack of room in a house is to add to the volume of the building. Provided that there is sufficient space around the property, an extension is a very effective, if costly way of improving your home. Aside from adding rooms, the changes that result can often be used to reconfigure some of the other rooms and improve the planning of the whole building. Alternatively, an extension can sometimes be designed to avoid disruption to the rest of the house once the building work is underway, with no major building work in the existing house until a wall is broken through to create a new access.

Conservatories

These are a special kind of extension that bring their own benefits and disadvantages. The reason that there are so many conservatories built in the UK is more to do with the skill of the salesmen than their ability to improve the lives of their new owners. The major benefit of the more modest-sized conservatories is that if they are added onto the rear of a property with no possibility of side windows, the room that they are added onto will not lose too much

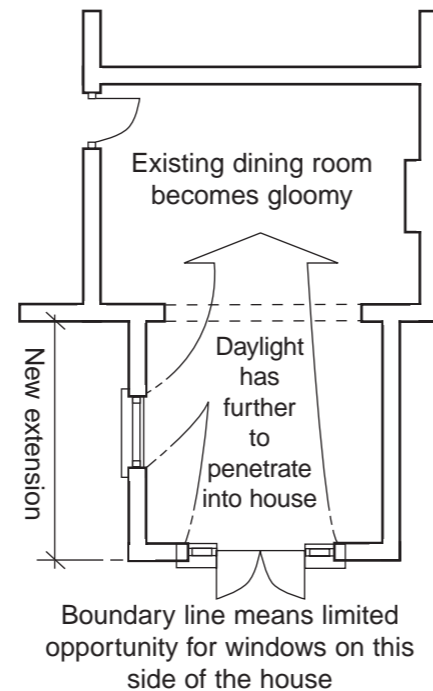
daylight. A badly sited conservatory will overheat in summer and a poor integration with the existing house will result in a glorified greenhouse that you have to pass through to get into the garden. You should never buy a conservatory from a door-to-door salesman without looking at other improvements that you could make for the same money.



Watchpoint: Often the first price that most conservatory salesmen quote is grossly overpriced.

Never buy a conservatory without shopping around and comparing prices quoted by other suppliers.

An extension will reduce the lighting levels towards the back of the existing rooms.



Extending with a glazed conservatory has kept the daylight levels in the interior of this house at a better level than if a conventional extension had been built.



Photo courtesy of: Crawford Partnership & Richard Seymour

Loft conversions

The reason many people first think of a loft conversion is because they believe that it will be a cheap option. With the right kind of spacious attic, loft conversions can work very well, but they are not particularly cheap compared with the other options. Often a significant amount of space, if not a whole room, will be lost from the first floor to fit in a staircase. Rooms-in-the-roof make interesting spaces, and are especially suitable for bedrooms. If a house is on a very cramped site, it may be one of the few options available to increase the living area in the property.

Basements

In places where space is at a premium, such as the central areas of towns and cities, the value of the land a house sits on is larger in comparison to building costs than in more typical situations such as suburban areas. This means that loft conversions are more cost-effective, but where even this is not possible, a more drastic solution to a lack of space is to go down rather than up. Adding a basement is expensive and very much the preserve of specialist contractors who have experience of this kind of work. But it is possible to add a complete new floor to a house in this way, effectively increasing the size of the house by 30%.

Demolish and rebuild

This is the most drastic step of all and involves a more complex operation in design and construction than is covered here. However, as house prices climb, it is increasingly a viable option. If a house is in poor structural condition, is a small building on a large site, is a bungalow, is in an area with very high land values or the proposed alterations involve extensive structural alterations to the whole building replacing it completely should be considered. In the UK, VAT usually has to be paid on home improvements (although some conversions can be an exception to this rule), but if you are building a completely new house the

VAT is zero rated which sometimes tips the balance in favour of the re-build option.



The family that owned this bungalow wanted so many changes, it was easier to demolish it and replace it with a new house.

Location, features, benefits and limitations of your house

Part of the process of deciding the best way to alter your home is to look at the house that you already have and identify its benefits and disadvantages. This can be quite hard to do objectively if you have lived in it for a while. Disadvantages usually spring to mind before the benefits, and a checklist can be a useful way of ensuring that you consider all the significant points and allow for them when the design stage begins. Assuming that you are doing this to improve your lifestyle, concentrate on those points that are important to you and your family, not to the local estate agent or your architect or builder.

A good starting point is to look at the site that the house stands on and how it is related to its surroundings. You probably cannot change most of these features and your alterations will have to either play them down or enhance them, depending on how you feel.