

# Basements – money-maker or white elephant?

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This article is on that most controversial of subjects, basements, and focuses on the things to take into account (in addition to Westminster's Basement Policy and the basement guidelines set out by John Lyon's Charity and the Eyre Estate) if you are considering adding a basement to your home.

As we all know, St John's Wood is expensive and the building stock is limited. Much is historically sensitive, being listed, or next to a heritage asset, or within the Conservation Area. It is rarely possible significantly to increase the square footage, and therefore the value, of a property by going up or out: the answer is to go down. Or is it?

Let's start with the quality of space that you will achieve below ground. One of the major challenges for an architect designing a basement is getting natural light and fresh air in. It is usual either to have a series of narrow lightwells or to create a lowered patio area with terraces. The latter can solve the light and air problem and give a good connection between the basement and the outdoors; it does, however, require a large garden. The more common narrow lightwell option almost always provides poor outlook from the rooms and minimal natural light. The worst possible solution is the lightwell in the middle of the garden, which has no relationship with the house and a poor relationship with the garden.

The most usual rooms to put in a basement are those that do not need a lot of natural light and fresh air: swimming pools, media rooms, gyms, utility rooms, etc. But these produce a lot of smells and high humidity and therefore need to be adequately ventilated. Air conditioning is required to ensure a healthy environment. The plantroom will be sizable, and serious space should also be allowed for ductwork, cabling, etc. This should be incorporated from the outset and not shoehorned in at a later date. The Planning Committee always comments on plans that do not



*Three basic things to think about: piling, cabling, and plantroom*



show plantrooms, as these, being noisy and smelly, can have a bad effect on neighbours.

The Committee also notices where the perimeter walls are shown unrealistically thin. A typical basement wall will include a structural retaining wall/outer layer such as piling, a first waterproofing layer, a thermal insulating layer, an internal drained cavity system, and then the final finish. This results in a chunky wall which can be 1m thick. Furthermore it takes expensive equipment to construct a retaining wall tight against a boundary: a basement beneath a typical terraced house of say 5.5m width is unlikely to add anything more than a long narrow dark railway carriage.

In creating this space you will inevitably have a dramatic effect on your neighbours, as issues of light pollution, water displacement and subsidence are exacerbated when you share a party wall. And don't forget that the Party Wall Act will require you to pay for your neighbour's party wall surveyor as well as your own.

Another matter to consider when thinking of a basement is how the new space will connect to your existing house. Will you lose good above-ground space for a staircase to the basement? How will the new rooms relate to the original ones? Will your sixteen-year-old son need to take his guests through your 'private' living room to reach the

basement cinema room? Will you need to add a corridor and fire doors to your open-plan ground floor in order to provide a means of escape from the basement?

If your house is listed, then the effect of the basement is of particular concern to Westminster's Conservation Officer. Quite apart from the disruption and potential damage that can be caused to the original building during construction, the basement will fundamentally change the way the house is used.

One of our principal concerns with basements is the impact on the trees that give St John's Wood its name. Planting ten olive trees in a patio garden on a basement roof does not make up for the loss of a single mature beech tree in an established garden.

The final point I want to make about basements is that they are expensive. In £/sqm a basement will cost about 50% more than building above ground, and much of the money is spent on parts that cannot be seen. It is important not to skimp on these costs, and always to use a responsible accredited builder. Plenty of large domestic basements are unused because of incurable damp.

So, in summary, if you are thinking of increasing the size and value of your house by digging down, beware of creating a white elephant, employ a good architect, and use a responsible builder. And hope that you have understanding neighbours.