

DESIGN ASSETS

Moving walls, increasing space and letting in light – structural changes, when done to the highest quality, increase sale prices significantly. Clare Dowdy reports



'It's all about quality of life. People are increasingly focused on experiences over objects'



PURE AND SIMPLE Above: A clever use of glass maximises the light in this kitchen extension, an Imperfect Interiors project **Left:** Exposed beams make an impact in this Dulwich kitchen, also by Imperfect Interiors **Top left:** The paired down shower of the winner of RIBA House of the Year, The Makers House by Liddicoat & Goldhill LLP **Right:** An 1827 house in Fitzrovia completely renovated by Carmody Groarke architects



PHOTOGRAPHS: IMPERFECT INTERIORS/CHRIS SNOOK; SIMON WATSON FOR HOUSE & GARDEN; JOHAN DEHLIN

Can well-positioned skylights, a new layout or smart flooring make a difference to the value of your house? Gut instinct suggests it must do, and now there's research to back that up. Well-designed London homes have consistently commanded more than their neighbours, according to property analysts Dataloft and specialist estate agency The Modern House. Sales data crunched from the past three years of more than 14,000 properties suggests a design premium of 12 per cent. So now we know: people are seemingly prepared to pay more for good design. "It's all about quality of life," believes Albert Hill, co-founder of The Modern House. "People are increasingly focused on experiences over objects, and our home >>>



IN DESIGN From left to right: Beth Dadswell of Imperfect Interiors; a detached home in Harpenden by Coffey Architects; once a Victorian gin distillery, this Whitechapel terrace has been renovated by Open Practice Architecture and is now a RIBA award-winning modern family home



is the place where we have the most experiences.”

The best architects see this played out in the residential areas where they work. “Most of the homes we’ve completed over the past 15 years have exceeded the expected sale price by at least 20 per cent,” says Phil Coffey, founder of award-winning firm Coffey Architects, “so although there is an initial capital outlay, on completion of the project, we in effect cost nothing.”

While home-owners may think purely in terms of extra square footage, good design is more nuanced than that, he says. “The job of an architect is to make space feel bigger than it is.”

The interior designers agree. Annabel Stringer of Stringer Interiors talks about reconfiguring space to make it feel more generous. “You can make a place feel bigger by opening up a wall, or doing a tiny bit of structural work.” As well as being an interior designer, Stringer develops

properties and project manages other people’s developments.

Beth Dadswell, a serial renovator and interior designer at Imperfect Interiors echoes this: “The quality of space is as important as how many rooms you’ve got. Don’t try to squeeze in as many rooms as possible, it may sound better on paper but people won’t be fooled.” She suggests making rooms multifunctional, such as a guest bedroom that could also work as a study and dressing room, “so new owners don’t have to knock down walls and put in RSJs.”

Meanwhile Amy Reynolds, area director at Chestertons, warns against thoughtlessly over-extending. She cites a top-heavy house with one small living room on the ground floor – typically open-plan with the kitchen – and then extended up to have lots of bedrooms upstairs. “There isn’t enough living space for a large family so why extend to have four or more

ON THE MARKET



WROTTESELEY ROAD, NW10 £1.799m

This stunning family house in Kensal Rise has four double bedrooms and a huge kitchen extension, off-street parking and a mature garden.

Agents: marshandparsons.co.uk; dexters.co.uk



CHESTERTON ROAD, W10 £3.695m

An immaculate family home just off Ladbroke Grove. It has six bedrooms, including a nanny/guest suite on the top floor, a play room and a south-facing garden.

Agent: johndwood.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHS: TIM SOAR COURTESY OF COFFEY ARCHITECTS; LEON CHEW



AUGUSTINE ROAD, W14 £1.225m

This unusual one-bedroom cottage just off Brook Green has plenty of space – a huge studio room features an artist’s window that lends the property plenty of light. Agent: bective.co.uk



GRIMSTON ROAD, SW6 £2.3m

Redeveloped for the modern family, this chain-free four-storey five-bedroom house with a double reception room, is close to schools and restaurants and transport links. Agent: chestertons.com

bedrooms? The overall price received will be lower per square foot than if the house remained without the conversion.”

Instead, a generous home is achieved by the flow of space and by lighting. Stringer points out that, “having the same floor throughout the flat makes it feel bigger and creates flow”.

Open-plan is still de rigueur. “Buyers don’t like a space that you need to twist and turn to get through, like a poky corridor, a kitchen island unit sticking out that you need to edge your way around, or a room with an awkward shape,” says Albert Hill. “That’s where architects come in.”

To stop an open-plan room feeling like an untidy aircraft hangar with poor acoustics, Dadswell suggests zoning with partition walls, internal glazing or shelving.

Good design is also about good light – natural and artificial. That’s helped with a variety of windows bringing in different

sources of light. “Mean windows that are small, cheap and poorly positioned will put people off,” says Hill.

Skylights really come into their own with basements. They may be slightly more expensive to build and don’t sell for quite as much (in square footage terms), “but if you can make an underground space feel like it’s above ground by getting views onto landscape and getting light down there, it makes a massive difference,” says Coffey.

A study by the Danish Building Research Institute found that roof windows and skylights provide twice as much light as vertical windows and three times as much as dormers. To a lesser degree, glass floor bricks allow natural light into room below.

Meanwhile a good artificial lighting scheme can make a huge difference, says Amy Reynolds at Chestertons. “A bad example is when there is no variety.”

In prime central London



QUALITY FINISHES Opposite: A former industrial space now a large home, Warley Close, E10, is for sale through The Modern House and Dexters for £1.6m. Above: Add character with dark colours. Both these rooms have used Farrow & Ball, Downpipe left and Railings right, to maximum effect

'A powerful vision is what sells. What people want are transformative experiences and they are prepared to pay a premium for that'

ON THE MARKET



CLOUDESLEY ROAD, N1 £2m
An extremely light and bright Grade II-listed four-bedroom, two-bathroom family house in one of Islington's most sought-after roads. Perfectly located for the amenities of Upper Street. Agent: kfh.co.uk



HAMMERSMITH GROVE, W6 £5.75m
This large family home has seven bedrooms, three bathrooms and three reception areas, including two that open straight out onto the generous garden, where there is a wine cellar. Agent: savills.com

where new build has set new standards of accommodation, agents report properties with large lateral spaces faring better on the market compared with townhouses with small footprints arranged over multiple floors. "Quality sells," says Jonathan Hewlett, head of London residential at Savills. "If a product is beautiful, with a great layout, it definitely sells."

Lucian Cook, head of residential research at Savills, confirms that well-proportioned properties in immaculate condition have weathered far better the downturn of recent years and are going to competitive bidding "because of their ability to draw buyers".

While it may be tempting to try to add value with a smorgasbord of luxurious materials, the

professionals believe that less is more. "Using fewer materials means you don't feel like you're in a different place in each room," says Coffey. Dadswell agrees. "A limited palette looks more architectural, more considered."

Coffey often specifies power-floated concrete, because it has a finish that doesn't need decorating. Stringer recommends "a lovely wooden floor. I've carpeted many bedrooms, but I wouldn't put carpet in the main spaces, I think it's dated." Instead, she suggests "a sisal or something that feels organic and natural".

Another popular natural material is clay, as it expresses people's quest for authenticity, says Hill. It's being used as a finish on walls, like a rough plaster. Likewise an incredible marble

will always delight people, but it needs to be used intelligently and sparingly, he cautions.

Dadswell admits that Carrara marble can be a mistake. "Anyone with a Carrara worktop – and I include myself in this – won't want another one. They chip, they corrode with lemon, they stain with oil and wine, they're not practical." Instead, non-porous composites impersonating marble are the answer.

Well-chosen fixtures and fittings also increase design value. Alongside wooden flooring, Stringer spends on door handles, light fixtures, tiles, worktops, and paint colours. Dark colours are fashionable, and she cites Farrow & Ball's Railings (charcoal black) and Downpipe (dark grey), which she complements with the

company's Strong White. Because bland will no longer cut the mustard. "It's about putting in a bit of character and creating a lifestyle," she says. Her West London clients ask her "to do the Soho House look" and create a relaxed, stylish comfort that oozes enjoyment rather than stiff formality. "It's about getting the balance between putting in enough character (so it's not boring) and going too far and putting people off."

Some design touches risk looking gimmicky. Beware the spa bath and the black loo. And now spotlights and down-lighting have fallen out of favour because too many can create a uniform, clinical, landing strip of light.

Neither Hill nor Stringer are fans of feature walls. "It's probably

the first thing people rip out," she says. Better to get some advice and splash out on an oversized artwork or tapestry. "It draws the eye and gives an extra dimension, but you can change it and take it with you," says Hill.

Design that adds value is achieved by trusting the architect and signing up to their vision, he believes. "If you like their work, you're best advised to bite your tongue and let them get on with it. Have the courage of their convictions. Because a powerful vision is what sells. What people are after is transformative experiences, they're willing to pay a premium for that. A tepidly done house doesn't do that."

As Stringer puts it, "Not everyone's going to like it but someone's going to love it." ■



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