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LOFT CONVERSIONS

Need an extra room or two, but can't face moving? The answer could be hidden in the attic. And all that's needed is a bit of creative planning to release the potential.

Words by **Chloe Scott-Moncrieff**

Converting the loft became fashionable back in the Nineties so you would think the novelty would have worn off by now. But the 'humble' attic renovation remains an enticing proposition because it offers a practical solution to lack of space. In a couple of months, you can create a new room or two. Get the design right and an abundance of natural light will pour in from above. It's a welcome alternative to moving house.

But with even the smallest of projects, preparation is key. For starters, height matters. "The minimum space between the ceiling and the

floor of the attic needs to be 2.2m," says Steve Mills, Managing Director of loft specialists, At Lofts Ltd. "Any less and you will probably have to drop the ceiling on the floor below," says Steve, who has converted several hundred lofts.

If you are new to roof conversions, seeking expert advice is crucial because there are myriad seemingly small factors like this to consider. For example, fire regulations are a minefield. "Open-plan lofts or lofts with open-plan floors below need sprinkler systems or wide, unobtrusive doors to contain the fire," says Steve. "Loft rooms on the third storey or above must have two fire escapes." Even ceilings can be problematic. "Those with lath and plaster"



"...unpretentious design..."

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Planning Permission

Planning permission is not required if you are extending a terrace house's loft by an eave, or a semi or detached building's attic by 50 sqm. Depending on the council, the figure includes the width of the roof and walls, which takes some of the living space away. The allowance is based on the assumption you are not increasing the roof's ridge height or front facade and that you haven't already extended the property elsewhere.

The odds are you will need planning permission (even if the project is tiny) if you live in a conservation area or the building is listed. Listed buildings require listed building consent.

Many loft conversion specialists advise that once you have acceptance from the planners, it is worth paying £67.50 for a certificate of lawfulness, which is a paper given by the authorities confirming you have permission so there are no restrictions later on in the development. Both you and the builder are responsible if there are.

Top left, the bedroom has spectacular views across London; left, the conversion as seen from the street; above, windows on either side of the room maximise light

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require extra work.

Another concern is noise. Think about sound-proofing. And should you have a water tank in the attic that gushes every time the mains are used, Steve suggests replacing it with something that runs the property's waterworks silently such as a pressurised cylinder.

Thankfully, planning a bathroom is fairly simple. Plumbing for hot and cold water is a standard operation and a shower room package, including plumbing, costs little more than £2,000. For those going solo however, add an extra few thousand depending on the design's complexity. And remember, your new bathroom should be close to your existing soil pipe to avoid requiring a macerator for the sewage.

Hugo Tugman, Managing Director of architectyourhome, a company whose architects work with clients on a pay-as-you-go basis, says that building regulations normally cause the greatest obstacles. "Not only is there planning permission to consider (see page 95), but every conversion requires building regulation approval - people forget this," he says. At its most basic, a loft extension requires to more than strengthening the floor and the new stairs must have 2m of clear headroom above the existing ones. Nevertheless, allow eight weeks and £2,000 minimum for submitting applications and drawings for planning and building, and more time and cash for a grander exploit.

Tugman also mentions the Party Wall Act. For those in terraces or terraces, you are legally obliged to get a written agreement from your neighbour for work on a shared wall.

But it's not all bureaucracy. Choosing the style of a conversion is another consideration. Most popular is the Mansard design, which uses the original shape but incorporates another layer. It is constructed from timber and steel frames and if used with dormer windows, creates maximum head-space in most terraces and semis. "The cheapest conversion is when the roof is high enough to convert within the slope. This is most common in detached houses and burglarions. So different are individual projects, a simple one may cost £15,000, while a high-spec conversion could be £35,000 or more. Having an architect can make a difference too. "An architect may come up with four or five unexplored options," says Tugman. "Twenty years ago when conversions were more rare you could get away with the standard box - now that isn't enough."



Adding an extra room

Brief: To create a bedroom and ensuite bathroom
Budget: £75,000
Location: Tufnell Park
Architect: William Toker

Having recently introduced a live-in nanny, the couple needed space and privacy. Architect William Toker realised the solution was to look up. "We created the basement space for the au

pair: the owners, Donnie and Liane, were to live in the roof with the children living in between."

Toker steered clear of the buzz-look synonymous with contemporary design. "There is an obsession for people to make their homes like hotels. Why? I don't think lime stone is domestic." Instead, the shower floor is simple pine decking and the sandblasted glass between the shower and stairway means the family always know when people are in both. "There is great domesticity in this place," says Toker.

The **lightning-bolt design** also meant the budget was kept down. "We didn't focus on fixtures. The dormer is made of acrylic sheeting. It is nothing special. The way it is composed is special," he explains. Light has been maximised with a wall-length pan-optic window offering views across North London. And the shower ceiling is all glass. "You have decking under your feet and as the shower comes down on your head, you can look out at the stars." For Liane, the conversion has an element of childhood fantasy. "The shower is almost like a chandelier. And the bedroom, with the window, offers a tree-house view around you."

Even the potentially dark stairway was addressed through simplicity, rather than elaborate design. "We just kept the staircase open so light could filter down below."



Above, fixtures and fittings have been kept to a minimum; left, a glass ceiling in the ensuite bathroom makes for magical showers under the stars