



Basements are a useful way of maximising floorspace, yet developers often cite costs as a prohibiting factor. Chris Windle

Bargain basement

Building below ground dropped out of fashion just after the First World War when land was abundant and basements were dark and damp. But in these days of high-density planning guidelines developers are being forced to consider basements once again.

"Over the last couple of years we have noticed an increasing interest," says Alan Tovey, director of The Basement Information Centre (TBIC). There are several reasons for this explains Tovey: "Increased densities related to higher land costs will influence the cost of basements and with a poorer quality of land, foundations are more expensive so builders want to get something for the extra cost."

living spaces

Basements have also evolved to become more than just storage areas. Developers and homeowners are looking to transform them into high quality living spaces. John Mullarkey, management consultant at Gemech, says: "Basements are now becoming sitting rooms, gyms, pools and games rooms. Whereas a room in the roof doesn't increase the footprint much, a basement is a blank canvas that rarely has planning issues." He adds: "If the developer has a reasonable amount of land it can batter down on one side and put windows in so that it becomes another level to the house."

But despite the fact that "virtually everyone wants a basement," according to Tovey, they continue to struggle when it comes to wooing the volume housebuilder. Michael Edwards, marketing director of Thermonex, says: "Most of our business is with small self builders. But the cost of land is going up so housebuilders will want to maximise what they have." Mullarkey adds: "We've noticed smaller developers doing bespoke jobs have started to use new build basements."

One housebuilder that took the plunge was Martin Grant. Thermonex carried out the design and installation of 35 basements on Martin Grant's 89-unit site on the banks of the river Cam on the outskirts of Cambridge. Four precasters were chosen for the different precast concrete works. Edwards says: "Some people are frightened of basements because they

haven't seen them before. Martin Grant thought they had made a mistake but came back and said they wish they had done them all that way."

A basement is undoubtedly an attractive feature for the potential buyer but larger housebuilders are still put off by the price and work involved. Ian Randall, md of Linden Homes south east says: "The additional space is always popular with homebuyers, but they are not usually prepared to swallow this cost."

He adds: "Basements are a great way of getting around land shortages. But the additional cost per square foot in a basement compared to a regular storey is considerable due to insulation and ventilation challenges. Consequently, we have not found basements cost effective in the mid market."

Basement enthusiasts would say much of the cost is cancelled out because expensive foundations are not needed. The TBIC says that basements can, in fact, increase margins by reducing the amount of land used. On a 129sq m house, TBIC calculates, a fully below ground basement will add 6.7% to the construction cost but will save 21% on land and increase margins by 9.3%. Margins on houses with a partially below ground basement grow to 15.7%. This is without the extra premium a house with a basement may command.

But housebuilders are still reluctant to introduce basements as standard and Edwards and Mullarkey concede that retrofits are far more popular as homeowners seek to improve rather than move. But enquiries are on the increase and smaller plots mean housebuilders will have to look to more innovative ways of creating space. So the future may well be underground. **hb**

BUILDING A BASEMENT

Basement construction has traditionally been about blockwork and conventional in-situ reinforced concrete construction, usually with a separate tanking system. In-situ concrete walls can also be constructed with insulated concrete permanent formwork. These systems typically consist of either tied expanded or extruded polystyrene panels or hollow polystyrene blocks, which are filled with concrete to form insulated structural walls.

The use of precast concrete wall panels, common in northern Europe, is on the increase in Britain. A number of precast walls are now available, and other systems, including box culverts, have also become more popular.

Waterproofing has improved as membranes become more durable. In Britain the traditional method of tanking is the use of bituminous membranes or asphalt. Alternatively enhanced waterproofing admixtures can give concrete walls and floors direct water resistance.

KEY CONTACTS

TBIC	01276 33155
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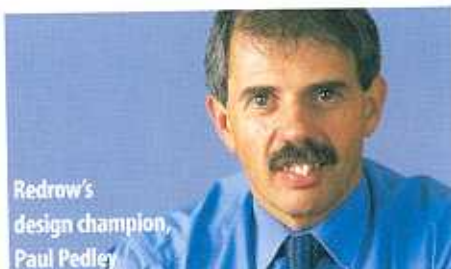
Housebuilders appoint design champions

CABE has launched a housing design champion programme, which has seen a number of volume housebuilders name board members who will be responsible for promoting good design across the industry (see box).

Following the appointment of executive deputy chairman Paul Pedley as its design champion, Redrow is now planning to establish a specialist urban design centre at its Northampton office to assess its housing schemes. Said Pedley: "The office will provide a broad skill base to allow in-house masterplanning, design code production and a consistent response to planning and urban design challenges."

At David Wilson Homes, a senior management team led by development director James Wilson will review the design standards of all of its housing layouts and disseminate the assessments throughout the business: "This year we will integrate the lessons from our Project:LIFE initiative, making space and light a priority," said Wilson.

CABE is now challenging other housebuilders to appoint board-level design champions. "Good design makes good business sense and housebuilders that are wising up to this will reap the rewards," said CABE



Redrow's design champion, Paul Pedley

chief executive Richard Simmons.

Housing and planning minister Yvette Cooper has backed the scheme. She said: "High quality design has a big impact on new homes and on whole communities. It is very welcome to see housebuilders stepping up to the challenge and raising their game on design."

- Redrow: **Paul Pedley**, executive deputy chairman
- Taylor Woodrow: **Graeme McCallum**, operations director
- David Wilson Homes: **James Wilson**, group development director
- Crest Nicholson: **Stephen Stone**, chief executive
- Berkeley Group: **Tony Pidgley**, md
- Barratt: **David Pretty**, chief executive

IN THE PIPELINE

CPS Leisure has been given the green light by Bassetlaw district council for the construction of 33 apartments. The £1.5 million scheme will be built at the former Trade & Labour Club, Westgate. Architect Bryan F Frewin is now working on tender documents and work is due to begin in early summer.

Warrington borough council has granted detailed plans for the construction of 24 sheltered flats. The £1.2 million scheme will be built at Sankey Manor, Vine Crescent, Great Sankey, Warrington. Warrington borough council and **Golden Gates Housing** are working on tender documents.

Brockwell Park Homes has won approval from Lambeth council to build 38 flats. The site is at Dohm House, Norwood Road in London and will run for approximately 15 months once a main contractor and start on site date has been confirmed.

Tenders are being invited for the construction of 201 sheltered flats at Buckshaw Village in Chorley. DLA Architecture has been employed by **Hica Life Developments** to design the scheme.

CSW Developments has submitted a detailed planning application for the construction of 32 flats in a four-storey building on Old Market Street in Manchester. Architect Nicol Thomas is designing the £1.5 million project.

Persimmon Homes has submitted plans for a residential development at Hillside Road in Bishop Auckland. The £6 million scheme proposes over 100 two and three-storey houses.

J Walters has submitted a detailed planning application for the construction of 192 residential units. Planning consultants David Shaw is handling the plans for the £12.5 million scheme at Electricity Co. & Dairy Crest, Wootton Road in Gaywood, Kings Lynn.

ISP Architects of Wrexham has submitted an outline planning application to Wrexham council on behalf of **GW Properties** for a residential development at Moreton Avenue, Johnstown, Wrexham. The scheme will not go ahead until late 2006/early 2007.

Dewhurst Dent has submitted plans to demolish Union Mill in Vernon Street, Bolton. Architects Stephenson Bell of Manchester is involved in the £6 million scheme, which proposes construction of 150 flats on the site.

Hartford Homes has been given full planning approval for its proposal to build 12 luxury houses on Ballakillowey Road site in Isle of Man. Plans were drawn up by Cornerstone Architect for the £2.2 million contract.

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Letters & opinions

Underground cowboys

I read with interest your March Supplement piece on basements. Brownfield and high density urban sites are indeed forcing the need for additional accommodation on the same footprint, and The Basement Information Group has shown in their current documents the cost analysis and benefits of installing basements in new developments.

But beware of the cowboy element that a new market attracts. My trade association, the Association of Specialist Underpinning Contractors (ASUC Plus), which represents engineered foundation contractors across the UK, offers a 12-year defects insurance guarantee on all work undertaken by our members. Not all contractors can provide proper warranty cover and with the advent of the government's Trustmark scheme, housebuilders must put the need to source approved warranty contractors higher up their agenda. You cannot leave it to chance.

Robert Withers, md, Withers Group

Unrealistic regulations

Is it me, or is the construction industry's growing obsession with health and safety procedures in danger of obscuring the stated goal of making construction a healthier, safer industry?

Regulations must be realistic. Unless they take into account the practicalities of the real world they run the risk of becoming irrelevant or, worse still, counterproductive. If you tie a workforce up in too much red tape, they will find a way of cutting through it; the law will be flouted and chaos will reign.

So what do I mean by unrealistic regulation? The new work at height regulations state a place is 'at height,' if a person could be injured falling from it, even if it is at or below ground level. This is so loosely drafted that there is almost no limit to how it could be interpreted. You don't have to look far to find everyday examples of overzealous health and safety regimes possibly doing more harm than good.

Lewis Scremin, LCH Generators