

## IT'S OFTEN THE CHEAPEST WAY TO CREATE SPACE, BUT OPEN-PLAN LIVING CAN STILL GO HORRIBLY WRONG

If dreams and nightmares are two sides of the same coin, it's frightening how frequently moving to your "dream home" comes up "tails". Some friends have recently exchanged on a new house after nearly a full year of stress. That is over and above the money wasted on surveys, legal fees and searches on the first house they found, which the vendors eventually decided not to sell after all.

It might seem as if your existing property is inadequate in all sorts of ways, but the stress and expense of moving are such that it is worth exploring all possibilities for improvement before looking elsewhere.

Any fat-cat corporation boss will tell you that the key to success is as much about efficiency as growth. Our homes are no different - we should try to make best use of what we already have. Extending the kitchen or converting the loft will add space effectively, but many people ignore what can be achieved by rearranging their existing rooms. This can cost-effectively create a better usable space, and genuinely and positively change a family dynamic within the home.

Clearly, this is not the answer to fundamental problems of location, nor that of a tiny garden. However, the way we live is changing and the way we use our homes is changing with it. Many homes that seem incompatible with the occupant's lifestyle, can be changed to fit. I have seen scores of Victorian houses – designed for Victorian living –

that we have been adapted to a less formal arrangement, which reflects 21<sup>st</sup>-century lifestyle.

The most common example of this is the simple "knock-through". It might seem like a straightforward choice between two rooms or one, but the effect can be significant. Firstly there is the sense of space. Cue Hugo's law of overlapping spaces, which states: Two separate rooms combined seem bigger than the sum of their parts because the functions previously served by each half of the space (for example: dining and living rooms) now can overlap so there is more space for each. Then there is the penetration of daylight: seeing daylight pouring from one end of the house to overlap with light from the other end gives an uplifting effect previously broken by the spine wall.

Possibly most important of all is the connectivity of what we do in our homes. The house that my children spent their first six years growing up in is a very typical Victorian two-bed terrace which originally was all cut up into a series of small, gloomy rooms. By clearing out the separating walls and putting in a visually lightweight staircase, the space flowed, the light poured from front to back and the kids had space to play within touch of Mum at her computer or Dad at the kitchen sink. The point of this picture of domesticity is that their growing-up experience was significantly enhanced due to the changes we made within the house.

The "open-plan" concept may seem scary, but the way I see it, even separate rooms are connected (with doorways). The first level of open-plan is wedging the doors open, and there are many shades of grey between this and a completely open Manhattan loft.

The most effective solution in an existing house is to combine the benefits of opening up with devices to zone the functions of dining, living, cooking etc. Changes in floor level or finish, double or sliding doors or screens, even the positioning of furniture can fine-tune this effect.

Architects are often accused of not thinking about their client's expenditure - sometimes rightly. So, for a cost-effective tip, before you go and spend the earth on agents' fees and stamp duty, or alternatively fork out for an extension up, down or sideways, invest a little in exploring the possibilities within. You may be surprised.

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## **How much will it cost?**

The structural work involved in a typical "knock-through" should cost in the region of £3-£4,000. The more expensive bit is the making good, re-plastering, moving radiators, matching flooring etc. A basic budget might be £10-£15,000 but it is amazing how these projects mushroom as people start adding various touches.

## **How much hassle is it?**

All building work at home is hassle, but most people seem surprised how quick the first stage can be. However, don't be fooled, all the little bits that make up the lion's share of the cost may well seem interminable.

## **What's the first step?**

Get a proper measured drawing of your. This will typically cost £600-£800. This might seem a lot, but with accurate drawings of the existing, plausible plans of the possible can be traced over, engineers can calculate beams and builders can prepare cost estimates.