

CONSERVATORIES ARE THE PLANNER' LATEST TARGET – SO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX AND SAVE THE PLANET.

There are many conflicting views about conservatories and it seems that we all carry as many pre-conceptions about this particularly British phenomenon as there are varieties. From the elegant Victorian wrought iron structures, to the ghastly squat boxes with fan shaped roofs, framed in chunky UPVC. From fantastic futuristic structures with seemingly impossible planes of immaculate glazing to the mock Georgian-Orangery style additions, wallowing in artificially distressed timbers, reconstituted stone and flowery cushions.

There is, however, a mis-conception surrounding conservatories. Traditionally a true conservatory is a mostly glazed structure that is built for the purposes of growing plants – a greenhouse attached to a house. Yet most people think of a conservatory as an extension, a way to add a sunny dining room to the end of their kitchen and thereby open up the space to the garden. It may seem a little pedantic, but why is this mis-conception so important? The answer comes from the folk who set the building regulations.

So, according to the building regulations, when is a conservatory a conservatory?

A true conservatory is not subject to the building regulations. This means that it does not have to comply with the recently inflated "Part L" of the regulations that require our homes to be energy efficient and well insulated.

A conservatory can be single glazed and heat can build up or be lost without the inspectors losing a minute of sleep. But in order to be a true conservatory, it must be entirely shut off from the house, by exterior quality doors. Additionally, it must not be heated by the same system that heats the house.

If we want the new extended space to enlarge and flow together with the kitchen, dining or living space within the house, then this must meet the standards laid down within the regulations. This is not a conservatory, this is a glazed extension and with the new regulations this is becoming an increasingly difficult thing to achieve.

Glass, even double-glazing, is a very poor insulator. The regulations require that new building works are energy efficient and this manifests itself most often in a restriction of the amount of glazed area (windows plus glass roof). There is a rule of thumb governing the amount of glass we are allowed to use: it should be no more than 25 per cent of the floor area of the extension, plus the area of any windows taken out in the exterior wall you are removing in the process. An extension with a glass roof means that you're adding an area of glass equal to 100 per cent of the floor area – so before you've even thought about adding any windows, you've exceeded the limit by four times.

The answer is to try to box clever. Put your pre-conceptions about elegant Victorian conservatories aside and think about where the glass will most effectively bring light in and give views. Look to use energy efficient glazing systems that can achieve a better thermal performance and

off-set areas of lower efficiency with high levels of insulation where it is possible.

One example we completed recently was a solid, zinc-clad roof, packed with insulation. The allowable glazed area was concentrated into one huge picture window that gave beautiful views down the garden. The structure was formed in a lovely rich cedar, which together with the glass and zinc formed a soft yet contemporary palette of materials to sit against the brick of a mid-Victorian villa.

There is no formula for good design. The most important thing is to think about how your plans will work as part of the house and how you will live with and move through the remodelled spaces. So don't just bolt on a glass box, and don't get tripped up by regulations or stuck over the definitions. Whether it's a conservatory or not, your home deserves some good design.

Hugo Tugman runs the design service Architect Your Home – www.architectyourhome.com

How much will it cost?

A simple "off the peg" conservatory in a standard form can cost as little as £10,000 to £15,000, but as the forms become more bespoke they rise to £50,000 or more. If the proposals involve significant works to the interior of the house (a new kitchen for example) then the costs can rise sharply and if you want to utilise high performance glazing systems to meet the regulations the costs can double the costs of your windows.

How much hassle is it?

The hassle will be determined by how much the work invades the house. If you are after a genuine conservatory that has no open access from the house, then most of the work will be external and you should be able to carry on living without too much disruption. Blending existing spaces with the extension usually means considerable disruption with floors, ceilings and walls all needing works to match things in.

What's the first step?

There is a big industry in "bolt-on box conservatories" and a quick internet search will identify plenty of choice. However, some professional advice from an architect can help if you are concerned about falling foul of the new regulations and may bring some extra creative thought to what can be done. The calculations are complex and architects, surveyors and approved inspectors increasingly have access to software that can work out these matters.