

GARAGE CONVERSIONS

In the quest for more living space, have you considered developing the garage? This often overlooked and under-used building is an opportunity for expansion waiting to happen - be it as a playroom, home office or even state-of-the-art gym...

Words by Adam Mornement

Photographs by Andrew Hayes Wetkins





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Garages are the homebrew of British domestic architecture; unsophisticated, a little bit murky, and often rather musty. Typically they're windowless boxes with concrete floors and paper-thin walls. The majority have been colonised by amateur carpenters, or engulfed by cardboard boxes and garden furniture – although some people have been known to keep cars in them. Despite this, the question remains: does converting this often-overlooked space increase or reduce the value of your property? Will you get more with or without a garage?

The answer depends largely on where you live. If home is the centre of a large city, where the cost of insuring and running a car is high, you are better off retaining your garage – last year a two-

Opposite page, a sliding door living room provides access to the Burrages' garage conversion. This clockwise from top left, the new exterior maintains the look of the original garage; the Burrages' eldest daughter enjoys her new playroom; the sliding doors open on to a space for a bicycle.



Of course, that decision depends on the planners. The question of whether a garage conversion constitutes change of use varies from area to area. The answer will also be influenced by the visibility of your house. If your proposed renovation includes the replacement of the garage doors with brickwork and windows, it will of course alter the appearance of your property. This will matter less if the house is hidden from view. But the issue that vexes every planning department is parking. From York to Yeovil, these people hate losing parking spaces. Your options here are to promise to tarmac half of your garden, sell your car, or convince them that you have space for external or off-street parking.

It is for these reasons that many garage conversions are done on the quiet, or within permitted development – which allows basic modifications to be undertaken without planning consent. 'Of the 300 or so garage conversions that we have done since 2001, only around 50 have required planning permission for change of use. Most can be done under permitted development,' says Phil Bateman, managing director of the Garage Conversion Company, one of the largest specialists in the country.

John Harte, managing director of Ormond Construction, sees the situation in a slightly different light. 'I'd say that about 90 per cent of garage conversions are illegal,' he says. In most cases, an 'illegal' conversion means that the garage doors have been retained, leaving the external appearance unaffected and the space behind superficially upgraded. One of the reasons for the popularity of the behind-closed-doors conversion is to retain the potential for selling the property 'with garage', a prospect significantly diminished once the garage door has been replaced with brickwork and windows.

Assuming you get past the planners, the next issue is meeting building regulations. Garages, even integral garages, are not built to the same specifications as habitable rooms. It need ▶

CONVERTING YOUR GARAGE:

PROS

- Unlike lofts and basements, access to a converted garage is unlikely to raise problems, or costs.
- A garage conversion creates flexible space quickly and cheaply.
- The improved insulation required to conform with building regulations will have thermal and cost-saving benefits for the rest of the property.
- Outside dense urban areas, converting a garage into a habitable space will almost certainly add value.
- In many cases garages already have electric and plumbing connections.

CONS

- Converting a garage into a habitable space can be expensive, particularly if improved foundations are required to carry a heavy masonry load.
- In dense urban areas it can be tougher to sell a property without a garage.
- External and/or on-street parking will raise your insurance premiums.



Above left, the dual-use space created in the former garage can accommodate dinner parties, or, right, one playful toddler

PLAY ROOM

Client: Mr and Mrs Burrage

Client's brief: create a playroom and storage space on the site of a Seventies garage

Budget: £30,000

Location: Balham, London

Interior Designer: Fleming Design Associates

With a young daughter and her toys to accommodate, space was already tight for the Burrages. In 2002, with a second child in mind, it was time to act. "We decided to turn the garage into a habitable space and convert the loft. Work began in January 2003. It's made a real difference to our lives," says Claire Burrage.

The existing garage was a cheap Seventies addition to the Burrages' Victorian house in South London. "It was full of clutter and garden equipment," says Burrage. No part of the original structure remains.

The work was carried out by interior designer Alistair Fleming, a friend of the family then living across the road. "The house had plenty of bedrooms, but was short on living space," says Fleming. The remodelled garage would address the imbalance, while retaining some storage space.

Before work began, Fleming talked to Wandsworth Council's planning department, who stipulated that, from the front, the new-build addition should look like a traditional garage. "We also agreed to line it up with the parapet, and carry through the mouldings on the façade of the three-storey house," says Fleming.

The garage doors open into a 6ft-deep space used for storage and services. The rest of the new build is accessed from the sitting room, through a sliding door inserted. It is used as a playroom. "The sliding door enables us to close off the playroom in the evening," says Burrage. This area also finds occasional use as a dining room.

Fleming Associates (01179 071 668). ▶





Below, the collapsible gym, ready for use on the hydraulic floor plate and, below right, stored out of sight beneath the high ceiling to create a more traditional parking space

perspective it was a question of trying to use the space twice.

The garage refurbishment was part of a comprehensive £300,000 redevelopment overseen by Kasia Piotrowska-Brown, project architect and director of Formwork Ltd. In the 10 months leading up to March 2003 the cramped, three-storey property was stripped of its low-grade post-war interior and remodelled into a home fit for a millionaire.

Because the property already included a parking bay, no planning permission was required for the garage. Like the rest of the scheme it was designed under permitted development. Aside from the dramatic full-height spiral staircase – made of steel, with glass steps – the other significant addition was a two-

not be expensive (£8-12,000 should cover the conversion of a single garage) but, at the very least, you will need to improve insulation and insert windows to bring the newly-converted part of the house up to the same standards as the rest of the property.

"You're basically turning a shell into a habitable space. Garages are built to far lower specifications than other rooms. They have poor thermal characteristics and, because their floors are quite low, they can be vulnerable to flooding. Many have very thin brickwork, sometimes only four inches thick," says John Harte.

The main expenses are the addition of inner walls and the garage door infill. This additional masonry load may also require improvements to the foundations – typically the quality of the foundation is checked when excavating for the door infill. "Flat roofs can also be a problem as they leak a lot of heat," says Nick Route of the Garage Conversion Company.

Once complete there should be no difference between the converted garage and the rest of the property. If done correctly, the space will be capable of anything. "Most people want to use them as a playroom, a study or an office. But we've also been asked for granny annexes, and a recording studio," says Route.

The simplest garages to convert are integrated spaces in modern properties. Prior to the Thirties, very few properties were built with garages. If a period house does have a garage, it is likely to be a later addition, often peripheral to the main property. This adds expense to the conversion. In most cases you'd be better off building a new out-house or addition to meet your needs.

But if the proliferation of companies dedicated to garage conversions is any indication, the prospect of remodelling the ground floor is becoming increasingly appealing. It certainly beats moving, with all the cost, time and effort that entails. ▶

GYMNASIUM

Client's brief: the comprehensive redevelopment of a three-storey Notting Hill mews property including a multi-functional garage.

Budget: the total budget for the refurbishment was £300,000, of which approximately £20,000 was spent on the garage/gym.

Location: London W8

Architect: Formwork Architects Ltd

As well as space for a large family car, the ground-floor garage of this Notting Hill mews property incorporates a hydraulic floor-plate complete with collapsible gym. It is also wired for surround-sound cinema. It can be whatever you want it to be, although not all the same time. Motor enthusiasts, fitness fanatics, and cinema buffs should form an orderly queue.

The mix of uses came about because Challenge, a small high-spec developer, wanted to retain the existing garage while maximising the square footage. "We probably wouldn't have been allowed to lose it anyway. Councils are very protective of parking spaces," says director Graham Rose. From a design



storey addition at the rear, creating a second bedroom, and a kitchen/dining area.

Very little expense was spared. Around £20,000 was lavished on the garage alone, with an industrial lift, and a sliding timber door that wraps around the interior when open. Piotrowska-Brown even found a way to let natural daylight in, with a window punched through the staircase light well. It certainly doesn't feel like your typical garage.

Unfortunately for the developers, almost as soon as work was completed, Operation Desert Storm broke out in Iraq. As confidence drained from the market, Challenge put the house up for rent. But it remains for sale. Offers are invited in the region of £1.4 million. Challenge (020 8947 7945).

STUDIO FLAT

Client's brief: convert the double garage of a London mews property into a studio apartment and single garage

Budget: £23,000

Location: Notting Hill, London

Architect: Woolf Architects

The evening before construction was due to start on the conversion of his double garage, the owner, a retired film director, invited architect Jonathan Woolf to dinner. Over coffee, Woolf was asked to look at the surveyor's proposal. 'I was horrified. They intended to put the bedroom of the studio flat at the back of the garage, with no light or

and two upper levels of luxury, open-plan living space. The client planned to spend nine months of the year sailing, so he decided to create a revenue stream by renting part of the property.

The brief was to convert the garage into a small studio apartment, with space for a single garage alongside. A built-in kitchen unit and enlarged cherry wood bed-head organise the space into distinct cooking, sleeping and living areas. The low kitchen unit allows daylight to permeate the windowless bathroom. The main living space is clean and minimal, with a floor of solid American white oak, natural plaster waxed walls and a stainless steel kitchen. Electric sockets were built into the floor to keep the walls plain.

Storage was a key issue. The new wall that divides the studio from the single garage is cut away at roof level to create a large bookshelf. Hidden behind the shelf is a door accessing deep storage in the airspace above the adjacent garage. New exterior doors were commissioned with large windows cut into the top. Maintaining the appearance of a garage by-passed the requirement for planning permission, also allowing the client to 'shut up shop' while he is away ■

Woolf Architects (020 7692 1086)



ventilation," says Woolf. He stayed up all night to reorganise the space. When two builders arrived the following morning, the new plan was handed over and work commenced.

The mews house consisted of a garage that had previously been used as a car repair workshop,

Above, in the open-plan conversion, the enlarged bed-head also partitions the sleeping and kitchen spaces. Above right, maintaining the appearance of a garage removed the need for planning permission. Below, open the door and the view is anything but traditional



DIRECTORY

The first three companies are among a growing number of contractors and construction companies specialising in garage conversions. The Garage Conversion Company, which describes itself as the UK's 'first and largest' specialist, has seven franchises around the country.

The Garage Conversion Company
(0800 587 0262;
garageconversion.com)

Oliver James
(01908 520 070; oliverjames-build.co.uk)

Signature Garage Conversions
(0870 240 6402;
convertyourgarage.co.uk)

Ormond Construction Ltd
(020 8450 2244;
john@ormcon.demon.co.uk)

London-based residential renovation specialist, with substantial experience of remodelling garages.

Wohr Parking Systems
(01993 851 791; wohr-parking.co.uk)

German manufacturer of mechanical systems for underground parking and stacking.

The Garage Door Company
(0800 889 777; garage-door.co.uk)

One of countless garage door manufacturers throughout the UK. Search Google or the Yellow Pages for providers in your area.