

Extreme renovation projects: knock it down and start from scratch

Many homeowners have wished they could knock their house down and start from scratch. Now more and more are doing it. Christopher Middleton reports on the most ambitious renovation project of all.



Lantern House, in Bath, is proof of the merits of knocking a home down and starting again. £1.34m, Knight Frank (01225 325999 knightfrank.co.uk)

By Christopher Middleton

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What do you see when you look at your house? The much-loved repository of all you hold dear? Or an unsentimental square-footage of bricks and mortar, that could be demolished and then rebuilt in a more efficient and profitable configuration?

Increasingly the latter, it seems. It might sound dramatic, but more and more of us are coming to the conclusion that if the house we've got isn't quite what we want, the solution is to knock it down and build a bigger and better version.

The practice has long been common among large-scale developers, where it has been dubbed "erase-and-replace." But today it is just as likely to be private home owners who buy the old houses, carry out the new build and take on all the risk.

In central London and the Home Counties, where prices keep rising, you can make a small fortune by maximising the potential of your land. The former Arsenal footballer Thierry Henry caused consternation in Camden earlier this year when he proposed building a brand new home on the site of his old one in Hampstead, including a spectacular four-storey fish tank. Many locals, including the actor Tom Conti, criticised the footballer for planning to demolish a home that was just 13 years old. But the numbers made sense. The work would have cost £2m, but added £4m to the value of his property.

“You can see why it’s worth doing,” says James Wyatt, of the Surrey agency Barton Wyatt. “Expectations have risen. The internal and external finishes of even 10-year-old houses are no longer up to scratch.

“The rough rule of thumb is that you spend a third of your money on the land, another third on your demolition and building costs, and in return you get a third back in profit. Though in reality, your profit margin is more likely to be 20 per cent.”

Either way, it’s a better rate of return than you get from the building society. And what’s more, you don’t pay VAT on materials for a new house.

It isn’t only hardened property professionals who are waking up to the benefits. Thirty-nine-year old Josh Cole works for a conservation charity. But he turned into a spare-time property developer when he fell in love with a not-particularly special house at Milford on Sea, in Hampshire.

“The view sold it to me,” he explains. “Across to the Isle of Wight and The Needles. I thought this would just be such a great place to retire to, and I’d kick myself if I didn’t take the opportunity.”

Having bought the house in 2006 for £545,000, he then let it out for a few years while he planned something more dramatic. Then, in 2011, having sold his house in London, he sent in the bulldozers. A few months later, the tired old Sixties home was gone (four bedrooms, 1,500 sq ft). In its place was a sleek, architect-designed residence (five bedrooms, 3,000 sq ft), with a £1.65m price tag.

Of course, it isn’t just a matter of knocking down your house and selling the new one for three times as much as you paid for it. Aside from worrying about architects, surveyors, engineers, materials, utilities and decorators, there’s the little matter of getting planning permission.

“When we bought this place, everyone said we’d never get consent from the council to rebuild,” says scriptwriter Viv Young. With husband James, she bought a dilapidated 1,100 sq ft bungalow plus outhouses on 1.5 acres of land at Pease Pottage in West Sussex. It is now a 4,000 sq ft home, complete with detached cottage.

“So we took a lot of care to consult planning department officers at every stage, and we listened carefully to what they had to say. One of our neighbours was worried we would be looking over into her property, so we altered the design to accommodate her concerns.

“We also focused on the environmental aspects, installing a ground-source heat pump, as well as guttering that directs the rain into a 10,000-litre tank that provides water for the washing machine and the loos.”

Wise move, says Jonathan Harington, a former Knight Frank man who now runs his own home-search company, Haringtons UK.

“Eco-buttons are very definitely the ones to press when you’re applying for planning permission,” he says. “You need to show you’ll be installing eco-friendly heating. It doesn’t harm if you offer to turn a ditch into a nature pond, or to plant trees, either.”

Local knowledge is also essential. “You must have a feel for the area,” says Clive Abraham, who replaced a four-bedroom Eighties bungalow with a three-storey mansion, on the market at £1.4m. “Ideally, if you want to demolish and rebuild, you’re looking to find an old bungalow on at least half an acre, in an area where there are already a few nice two-storey houses.”

Sticking close to home is essential, agrees Alastair Gibson. His company Charlcombe Homes is carrying out erase-and-replace projects in and around the small, upmarket Lansdown Ridge area of Bath.

“I’ve lived here for 20 years and worked here for 10,” he says. “It really helps if you can build a good reputation, with both the planning department and the neighbours.”

Bold home owners are now approaching firms like Charlcombe with proposals. It marks a distinct shift in the property climate.

“Ten years ago, I would never have asked a client if they would consider knocking the place down and starting again,” says Harington. “Today, though, it’s one of the first questions.

“Mind you, 30 years ago clients would never have contemplated buying a new house. They wanted period properties; everyone looked down on faux-Georgian. That’s all changed. Now most people are more interested in a house’s functionality than its history.”

There is, however, a cast-iron rule if you’re buying a property that you intend to knock down: don’t mention the demolition. “It is best not to say the D-word in front of the current owner,” says Mr Harington. “It’s bad enough if you criticise their décor. Telling them you’re going to demolish their

home is even worse.”

Ten constructive tips on how to demolish and rebuild

- **Stick to upmarket areas** The cost of building a house remains constant; the price you’ll get for it depends on the location.
- **Put in the preparation** Spend money on your application. Hire an architect, do costings, make it look professional.
- **Be nice to council planning officers** Treat them as partners, not enemies whose aim is to thwart you. Sound them out informally, long before putting in your application.
- **Go eco** Show how your home will be low carbon and low energy.
- **Check for bats** It sounds daft, but you won’t be allowed to demolish a house which is home to certain types of protected bat.
- **Listen to the neighbours** Take their concerns into account when you’re applying for permission; the council certainly will.
- **Get 20 per cent off** If you’re building from scratch, you shouldn’t need to pay VAT.
- **Investigate a partnership** If you’re nervous about building your own place, why not join up with a small developer who has done this before?
- **Do the sums** How much will your newly built house be worth? And how much will you have spent to achieve it? If the profit margin is below 20 per cent, think twice.
- **Expect discomfort** Home life won’t be cosy while the old house is being demolished and the new one built.

For more examples of houses knocked down and rebuilt from scratch, see

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