

The war over billionaire basements



A west London basement conversion featuring a nightclub dancefloor and DJ booth Sarah Lee / eyevine

Damian Whitworth

Last updated at 1:56PM, April 7 2015

The battle of the basements, which has been swirling, street by street, mews by mews, across some of London's smartest neighbourhoods, has flared up in a new hotspot. Incoming fire has been reported at a handsome double-fronted house in Holland Park where major renovations are under way to provide a couple and their four children with a magnificent family home.

The work includes a major basement development featuring those standards of the modern mansion, a gym and a wine cellar. However, there is local opposition to the application to install an air-conditioning system. That the owners go by the name of Beckham has made headlines.

The underground resistance in this case comes from a neighbour who told planners that the air-conditioning units needed to cool the Beckhams while they worked out and to

control the environment of their wine would “affect the historic character” of the Victorian neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, over in Mayfair, John Caudwell, the billionaire founder of Phones4u, has submitted plans to turn a 1960s car park into a “super prime” development to rival One Hyde Park, the billionaire dormitory that is Britain’s most expensive address. His development of apartments and townhouses would excavate even deeper than the existing three basement parking areas to offer owners swimming pools, saunas, steam rooms and a wine cellar. A neighbour told a local newspaper: “It’s going to be horrendous. We refer to [Mayfair] as the Somme because of so many basement builds with the noise of digging and mess.”

For the developer seeking to maximise profit on London real estate or the family hoping to maximise their urban space (with an eye also on increasing the value of their home) there is nothing to beat digging a very large hole in the ground and then pouring money into it.

It is no wonder that iceberg homes, where the subterranean square footage is as big as or exceeds that of the original, above-the-surface home, have become so popular. However, the noise and nuisance caused by the excavations has divided some communities into diggers and non-diggers.

You can easily spot the diggers. They are the ones with conveyor belts whirring all day emptying tons of soil into skips that are then removed by huge trucks that jam the narrow streets. You can spot the non-diggers too. They are the ones, generally plummy and older, marching up and down their roads filming the construction work on their phones and remonstrating with site managers.

Kirsty Bertarelli, the singer and former Miss UK who is Britain’s richest woman, and her husband, the Swiss billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli, received approval for a two-storey underground extension in a mews house in Belgravia last month. The plans said that the expansion was needed to accommodate their growing family. The couple also have homes in Geneva and Gstaad.

Tamara Ecclestone dug for her dogs and created a basement spa for her pooches. Frank Lampard and his fiancée Christine Bleakley annoyed neighbours with lengthy renovations of their southwest London home, which included a basement pool. The Tetra Pak heir Hans Rausing, Roman Abramovich and Lakshmi Mittal are other well-known super-basement enthusiasts.

The Queen guitarist Brian May said that Kensington had once been a quiet place to live but was “becoming a hell hole” as selfish neighbours “declared war” on others with their building work. “It’s really sad,” Joan Collins told a residents’ magazine. “I find it shocking that people are digging down to put in swimming pools and bowling alleys when they live here for two or three months of the year.”

Julian Lloyd Webber wrote of the “plague” of basement developments. The sight of

carpenters arriving at a neighbour's house to erect plywood hoardings enclosing the front of the building "strikes fear into the hearts of residents", he said. He was particularly annoyed that his neighbour, Gert-Rudolf Flick, the Daimler-Benz heir, was permitted to create a two-storey subterranean area to include separate rooms for winter and summer clothes, a luggage store, a 50ft swimming pool, a gym, a cinema and a beauty room.

The basement industry has produced its own luminaries. One of the best-known is Alan Waxman, director of the developer Landmass, whose enthusiasm for digging deep has earned him the nickname "the mole". "People say my properties are a bit like the Tardis in *Doctor Who*," says Waxman. "It looks very conservative or conventional from the outside, but when you walk indoors it is like going into a different world."

Waxman is not being accused of being a nuisance and insists that well-run renovations can minimise disruption. He scours London's plush areas on his scooter looking for plots ripe for transformation and once bought one after chatting up the woman who owned it in Annabel's, the Mayfair nightclub.

A few years ago, Nicole Kidman was planning to buy a Belgravia mews house that Waxman renovated as a London bolt-hole before pregnancy made her change her mind. He constructed a dramatic well to light the basement and filled it with a 30ft waterfall down a wall of bronze into a pond.

The trick with basements, he says, is to give them ceilings at least 10ft high so they don't feel dingy. So it should feel as good as any other room in the house? "No," says Waxman firmly. "You want to make it feel like the best room in the house. So when people hit the basement floor they say: 'Wow!'"

Owners of super-basements don't seem to like the word "basement" at all. In a new BBC documentary, *Millionaire Basement Wars*, a mother of four children who owns an eight-bedroom house in Hampstead shows off a basement (sorry, it just slipped out) conversion that she calls "the entertainment floor". It includes a gym, a swimming pool (with waterfall) a cinema, a wine cellar and a humidifier. "This is where we entertain people. And if you want to make an impression you want to make sure that when they use the cloakroom they go into a nice room there as well."

She says they had to include these features because the next person to buy the house would expect them. "I've been told that it's better than the Four Seasons," she says. The renovations doubled the size of what was already a 5,000 sq ft home, took two years, cost £1 million and are estimated to have increased the value of the house from £7 million to £13 million.

It has also emerged that nearly half the basement sites visited unannounced by the Health and Safety Executive in three London boroughs failed safety checks. There have been high-profile stories of damage to neighbouring homes, such as the incident in Belgravia where the road collapsed and a skip sank into a storage room.

Among the more vocal non-diggers is Kensington resident Jeremy Garston, who says that building work in his street has caused damage to his home's frontage and created cracks in the garden walls. "An absolute nightmare. Horrendous. Life-changing." Renovations on a house next to him, including a double-storey basement, have been going on since the summer of 2013. "There was a refurbishment that took ten months on my other side and next to that four flats that are still being refurbished."

A former City worker who now trades from home, he says that the stress of the noise and nuisance has caused him medical problems. A doctor wrote him a letter, which he submitted to the council, recommending that he be re-housed. He hasn't been. He has amassed thousands of photographs and videos of what he believes are transgressions by building contractors and has been advising residents in other streets on how to make complaints about the disturbance they experience.

"There are people, the Beckhams are a good example, who want to upgrade a family home and improve their living quarters for their four children. I get that," he says. "The house next door to me is a tool for developers and is going to be sold to someone from overseas who is going to be here three weeks a year. It's a trophy home."

Kensington and Chelsea council has ruled that it will no longer approve basements of more than one storey and that they should not encroach beneath more than 50 per cent of a garden. They had previously been allowed to stretch beneath 85 per cent of a garden. Westminster is also planning to stop multistorey basements.

Jeremy Garston, whose allies have formed Residents for Basement Justice Campaign, believes that the sheer number of single-storey basements being approved means that the nuisance will continue. He wants to see stronger noise and environmental regulations protecting residents and compensation from developers.

The documentary shows the hard-headed individuals with whom residents must deal, including the driver of a "grab" truck that collects soil. He is shown blocking a street and being berated by locals. "If you've got any conscience you won't make a grab driver," he says cheerfully. "You've got to be as ignorant as pig shit." Of mega basements he says: "Progress, it's called. Pays my bills."

Rosie Caley, of the Oxford and London Building Company, which has built several multilevel basements, says her company's work is mostly single-storey and that the Kensington ruling is unlikely to affect demand. However, other developers are understood to be considering challenging the ruling.

Caley says that her company is sympathetic to the need to avoid long-term disruption and seeks to work with locals to minimise nuisance. Digging is here to stay because basements make sense. "These were built as family houses 100-200 years ago before the modern family bathroom was introduced and walk-in showers and kitchens that the family live in. It is unrealistic to think that if families want to live in London they have to live a 19th-century existence."

Without basements, Caley fears that families would move out of these Georgian and Victorian properties to larger properties out of the centre of London, and they would once again be broken up into flats as happened after the war.

The basement boom is spreading out to Acton in the west and to Hackney in the east. This year there was uproar in Suffolk at the first application for an iceberg extension extending under the garden of a cottage in Southwold, the seaside town known as Islington-on-Sea.

After loft extensions, side-returns and basements is there anywhere left to go? Waxman says he has been researching ways to maximise space at the Monaco Yacht Show. "I looked at the super-yachts and how they use space. As property values carry on increasing the value of the space becomes much higher; you want to use it much better. We use every square centimetre in London. They use every square millimetre on these super-yachts."

Houses designed like super-yachts? Somehow you just know it's going to happen.

Millionaire Basement Wars is on BBC One on April 14 at 10.45pm

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

12 comments

 **Marc Stchedroff**

7 people listening 

+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

p bridger

April 07, 2015 19:08

If correct engineering, HSE, and planning protocols are followed why shouldn't people have the right to increase the size of their property. Envy, is usually the root of most objections.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Ian Whitlock

April 07, 2015 18:30

Spend £1million and add £7 million of value. Tax free if main dwelling then sold? A trend likely to continue.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**oldcrumpet**

April 07, 2015 18:08

Interesting how times really do change and proof we are running out of space.

Decades ago, the basement in a London house was the housekeeper's apartment. Seviceable, but basic.

Not even a swimming pool...Tsk.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Mark Gambrill**

April 07, 2015 17:12

(Worms are parasitic, soft-bodied organisms that can infect humans and animals. Parasitic worms fall into several different classes and include flukes, roundworm, and tapeworm)

Best place for them is in the basement away from the light and away from the rest of the normal population.....the Beckhams that is.

Dig away.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Raggedhand**

April 07, 2015 15:52

Will people move out of London if they can't build basements so that those million(s) pound houses will be broken up for flats. No.

As for the renovations in the pics...boy, are they butt-ugly modernistic tat. Give it 5 years and they will all be so dated that they'll be torn out again, probably without ever being touched by their absentee owners.

1  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Freebooter**

April 07, 2015 23:14

@Raggedhand

Butt-ugly it is not. Unless your preferred style is 1970s tiled fireplace, shag-pile rugs and faux copper sheeting over the fireplace.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Scott Benowitz**

April 07, 2015 15:23

I work in my father's architecture office in the suburbs of New York City, I often notice that the most overlooked direction for expansion is right beneath our feet—literally directly beneath our feet. Prior to the 1980's, the technology to waterproof a basement was very expensive, it would not have made sense for most people to want to extend their houses or their apartments downwards unless they were survivalists who were attempting to build some sort of super-secret bunkers, the waterproofing materials were not being produced in a manner that would make them cost effective. In the 2nd decade of the 21st century, it is still expensive to waterproof a basement, a subbasement or a sub-subbasement, but people are now finally seemingly slowly starting to discover how much space you can reclaim by doing so....

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

RobertG

April 07, 2015 15:04

All a great wheeze until a deluge of rain destabilises the whole terrace and a hapless neighbour's house falls in on itself, then not so much fun. Especially when major injuries or fatalities occur. Happened in Finchley last year, ground floor flat decided to go sub-terranean, whole house collapsed, neighbours too.

3  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

TheHorsesMouth

April 07, 2015 14:50

How the other half (Errr sub 1%) live,....

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Joannah Yacoub

April 07, 2015 10:25

Improving an existing basement is one thing. Digging on that same level into your own garden is one thing but going well below the foundations of the existing house should be banned. London is built over a network of old river and stream channels. If there is unusually high rainfall, the water table rises. That water has to go somewhere and it is often into the basement areas of other neighbouring properties who have not tanked out their sub-levels to the same degree as their excavating neighbour. The same problem can occur in reverse if there is a period of low rainfall which can cause subsidence and again it will be the adjacent properties which suffer. I agree with the new controls which are being introduced and they are not a moment too soon.

10  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

stella hollis

April 07, 2015 14:40

Your garden is next door to your neighbour's and the disturbance is awesome. Why not live

elsewhere ?

2   Recommend Reply

Karen Wood

April 07, 2015 07:51

This situation appears to be a very good example of 'The Tragedy of the Commons' in operation although with the slightly different position that a home owner is deemed to own the entire depth of the planet beneath their home. Would it not be sensible for the law to be changed to ensure that in cities particularly the property is deemed to end at a point immediately below its foundations.

7     Recommend Reply

Livefyre

© Times Newspapers Limited 2016 | Version 5.15.2.0(181272)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF

[My Account](#) | [Editorial Complaints](#) | [RSS](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#) | [International print subscriptions](#) | [Encounters Dating](#) | [Sunday Times Wine Club](#) | [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#) | [iPhone](#) | [Android smartphone](#) | [Android tablet](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Kindle Fire](#) | [Place an announcement in The Times](#) | [Sunday Times Driving](#) | [The Times Bookshop](#) | [Times Tutorials](#) | [Times Currency Services](#) | [Times Print Gallery](#) | [Handpicked Collection](#)
