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Interiors

Knocking your home into shape

For extra space and stylish open-plan living let the walls come tumbling down, says
Francesca Steele

Millions of homeowners will once more be opting to improve, rather than move in 2013, preferring to have work done, rather than face the obstacle of obtaining a mortgage—and paying stamp duty. Some families will still opt to add space by building an extension. But the expense of such projects is making knocking through even more popular; this produces the feeling of extra space at a much lower cost.

While knock-throughs were not so long ago limited largely to the creation of eat-in kitchens, or the removal of one wall between two reception rooms, builders are reporting an increase in the demolition of even more ground-floor walls. This may mean the loss of a hallway but it also creates the giant open space which remains the aspiration of many households. Almost tempted to wield the hammer yourself? Here are the 10 things that you need to know before you join the hole-in-the-wall gang.

1. What do I need to start?

Find a reputable builder, either via a friend's recommendation or a ratings site such as ratedpeople.com. Ask to see examples of similar jobs. You also need a structural engineer, but most builders have their own contacts and will include an engineer's work in their quote. Get more than one quote before you start. Larger companies often charge more, sometimes as much as double, but you

may feel more comfortable using something with a shopfront. Remember that altering the structure of your property is not to be undertaken lightly and requires a professional.

2. How much will it cost?

Dermot Steedman, a London builder, (ratedpeople.com/profile/dermarta) says that removing the wall between two reception rooms in a typical three-bedroom terraced Victorian property would cost at least £2,000 and would go up to a minimum of £4,000 for removal of all the hallway walls. Moving coving, skirting, electrics or plumbing would incur additional costs. If you are concerned about the age of the plumbing or electrics you will also have to pay for a specialist inspection.

3. What does my builder mean by 'load-bearing wall'?

Load-bearing walls are the structural elements of a house, which transfer a load between two points and down to the foundations. Steel beams are inserted where walls are removed to take the load, and are then covered in plaster. By contrast, stud partition walls, made from a

lower-ground-floor extension and a third-floor terrace have been added, transforming the property into a single family home. With the ground floor now housing a new recording studio, both residents can work from home. High-ceilings and hardwood floors leave a traditional touch to complement the modern furnishings and decor. White walls, ceilings and furniture and an abundance of natural light flooding the space make the open-plan rooms seem larger still.

timber frame overlaid with plasterboard, are non-load-bearing and easy to remove. The structural engineer will be able to tell you which is which.

4. Do I need planning permission?

No. Unlike an extension, the removal of internal walls needs no planning permission, which means that it is a great way of creating more space without the wait. However, you do need to apply to your council for Building Regulations Approval (normally between £100 and £200), giving a building control inspector at least 48 hours' notice to come and inspect the beam once it has been inserted.

5. Do I need to obtain any other authorisation?

If you are planning to insert one of the steel beams into a wall that is shared with another building, you will need a Party Wall Agreement drawn up by your

The open-plan house

Home to a musician couple, this five-storey house in Highbury, North London, was previously divided into five separate flats. Now, thanks to Ben Adams Architects, a London firm, a

solicitor. This will also need to be agreed to by your neighbour, a process that can add significant waiting time and

hundreds or even thousands of pounds to the cost. Alternatively, you could build columns jutting out of the wall and in the centre of the room in which to insert the beams, as this would not require permission.

6. How long will it take?

Usually the process will take about one week per wall, although this does not include additional time for drying out plaster (in the cold this will take longer), laying new floors or redecorating. This type of work will also cause substantial dust and disruption while it is being carried out.

7. How much will my open-plan space cost to heat?

With average household annual energy bills set to rise to £1,428 this year, it is worth bearing in mind that open-plan living may add to your bill, although the Energy Saving Trust says that good insulation, draughtproofing and efficient thermostats should mitigate against this.

8. Will it add value to the property?

Lindsay Cuthill, head of Savills Fulham, says the square footage of a property is now more important than the number of rooms. "Open-plan can definitely add value or at the very least make the property more likely to sell quickly. People are much more concerned with first impressions now, and that feeling of space when you first walk in is popular." However, he adds that families with toys and prams to store may value extra rooms over a spacious aesthetic.

9. Do I need special insurance?

Make sure that you have adequate buildings insurance that covers you for accidental damage — you want to know that you will be insured if someone drills through a pipe. It's also worth remembering that making structural changes to a house, particularly those that result in the creation of a new room, can affect buildings insurance, so let your

insurance company know your plans.

10. Is there anything else that I should consider?

The flooring, which you will probably either have to replace or carpet over, since there will be a narrow gap where you remove the dividing wall. Original floorboards are very difficult to match in width, depth and colour.

Additional research by Billy Ehrenburg

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