

Adapting your home

Moving house or extending your current home can be both an exciting and a stressful experience. Continuing our Power of Place series, **Alan McKay** highlights some of the most important things you might have to consider.

Whilst the thought of moving to a new purpose-built house with the smell of recently dried paint and everything fresh and new can be very appealing, there is also a charm and satisfaction in seeing your familiar lived-in home given new life with refurbishment / re-modelling and possibly an extension built on.

With the passage of time, our lives and needs change: a young couple have children and need more space; teenage children need study space and like to have friends around; as we get older we may need a bedroom and shower room on the ground floor or it may be that you would like to create a nicer living area that allows better enjoyment of the views. Whatever your needs or aspirations, it could be that with a little imagination, your existing home can, with some adaption, fulfil those needs.

One of the first considerations for most of us is of course, how much will it cost? If we need more space should we move to a larger house, build a new house, demolish the existing house and build a new one on the same site or alter / extend our existing house? How do costs compare?

For some, a simple cost comparison answers this question, particularly when the VAT implications are considered. Currently VAT applied to building work done on existing properties is 17.5% of the construction cost. This figure is set to rise to 20% at

the end of the year. New-build housing remains zero rated for VAT. If the extension you are planning for your home is substantial then you may find that the final construction cost plus the VAT is greater than the construction cost of a new-build house of a similar floor area. However, when you take into account the cost of buying a new site (and if it's an un-serviced site all the additional costs it takes to provide access, drainage and connection to utilities), and the costs involved with selling your existing home, it may be that the overall costs come closer together. Before you take a decision on which is the best route to follow, it's a good exercise to weigh up all the factors which could influence your decision.

Things to mull over if considering an extension:

Can the existing house be re-modelled internally by shifting / taking out partitions to create the kind of spaces you would like? Particularly if the partitions are non load-bearing, this could be a relatively inexpensive way to make better use of the existing space without the need for extension.

Is there the possibility of converting the existing loft to provide the extra space needed? Does the roof structure need alteration? Will there be enough headroom? Is there room to provide an access stair without unduly affecting

usable space? Can the alterations be made whilst the house is occupied?

If thinking to build an extension to the house, is there enough physical room on site to do so? Is overlooking from windows to nearby properties an issue? (SIC Planning have guidelines on acceptable distances between windows in habitable rooms). Is there an issue with proximity to legal boundaries? (Building Standards have regulations relating to the risk of fire spreading to adjacent properties). Are there services that may need to be re-routed (drainage, electricity etc).

Scale and character: if the proposed extension comes to be larger than the existing house, it may be a challenge to design it in such a way that it doesn't visually dominate the existing house and will be acceptable to neighbours and the planning department.

Design issues: why use an architect?

Whether it's an extension to your existing house or a new-build house you're planning, it's worth considering employing an architect. With their experience in design and knowledge of the various hurdles to overcome they can guide you and help to make your aspirations a reality. An architect, having consulted with you on your needs, budget and preferences will develop a design brief and propose sketch designs for you to consider before firming up the design of your choice. With the benefit of training and experience, they should be able to propose solutions that are attractive, imaginative and appropriate to the site and general area. A good well-thought-out design can not only provide the required accommodation but may significantly enhance the value of the property.

The thought of incurring expensive fees may put some people off from even approaching an architect with an enquiry. However, if the fee is roughly comparable to the cost of buying a three-piece suite or kitchen units (both of which probably require changing after 10-15 years) you might consider this one-off payment to be good value for money.

Once statutory approvals are gained and the project is being built on site, the architect can be useful to monitor the work of the builder to help ensure the finished product is built to the design standard specified and can negotiate any changes required on behalf of the client.



The approval process

Once you have a design drawn up, it will most likely need planning permission and a building warrant (there are some exceptions which are listed on the SIC Planning website).

The local planning authority will assess the proposed extension and decide whether they consider the design to be acceptable or not. In some cases, particularly if objections are raised, the planning department will submit their recommendations to the SIC Planning Committee (formed from local councillors appointed by the SIC) who will then decide if approval can be granted. Helpful design guidelines on what is generally considered appropriate can be accessed through the SIC Planning website. Impact on the area, scale, character, use of colour and materials are all important design issues to be considered. The Shetland landscape has its own beauty, and providing our accommodation needs in a way that enhances rather than detracts from the environment is the basic aim.

Normally (again with some exceptions) a building warrant application will also be required. SIC Building Standards will inspect the drawings and specifications submitted to check the design proposals can conform to the various health and safety requirements of the Scottish Building Regulations plus meet the ever-increasing degree of efficiency in energy retention called for. Depending on the size and complexity of the design, a certificate from a structural engineer may be required to accompany the application.

Sustainability issues

Increasingly as we strive to moderate and reduce the wasteful use of energy, greater care needs to be taken in the choices we make. Energy usage required in the production and transport of materials, the minimization of heat-loss through the fabric of buildings, the choice of heating / ventilation systems are among some of the important issues to

be considered in the design and specification of any building, large or small. Good orientation on site of a new house or extension to make the best use of solar gain through glazed areas is another basic design consideration.

The question of whether you demolish an existing house to clear the site for building a new house could be influenced by consideration of sustainability issues. For instance, if you have a stone-built house in a near derelict condition there may be the option to effectively build a new house within its shell designed to modern living standards. This could extend its life for another 100 years or more. A new house of comparable floor area built with less durable materials, although possibly cheaper to build, would have a probable lifespan of approximately 50 to 60 years.

Ideas for extensions

If after consideration of the various options, you settle upon the idea of adapting / extending your home how do you start?

If you've chosen an architect to help you with preparing a design, they will be able to help you focus your thoughts, prioritise requirements and develop a design brief for the project. To help with the preparation of the design brief, it's a good idea to jot down your accommodation requirements, ideas, things you've seen which you like and may influence the development of a design tailor-made to your needs. Some people find it useful to put together a scrapbook with photos of designs, finishes, materials, components etc.

It's good to think about the way you live and your preferences for the articulation of spaces. You may be drawn to open-plan living arrangements or prefer individual spaces (or a mixture of both). Perhaps you may prefer the living and bedroom areas to be separated to create a quiet wing in the house.

Bringing natural light into the house is often a strong design consideration which can influence where you place an extension. In Shetland, where for a considerable part of the year the daylight is limited, it is important to avoid, if possible, creating dark internal spaces which can be gloomy and require to be artificially lit a lot of the time.

How internal circulation is achieved is another important design consideration. Keeping corridor areas to a minimum, especially if they have no natural lighting, could again influence the position and layout of your extension. If your preference is for more open-plan living, the circulation can largely take place within habitable spaces. Having a stair-case rising out of a living / dining area can be an

attractive feature and be a real space-saver. A hallway, perhaps linked to a conservatory, could be made more spacious and welcoming if also used as a dining / sitting area.

Leaving the capacity for easy future development is worth considering. For example, if the ground floor of the extension you build fulfils your immediate accommodation needs, the roof-structure could be designed to be capable of being developed later to provide another habitable space – perhaps an additional bedroom or office area.

Once the architect is fully aware of your needs and requirements, it's in your best interests to keep an open mind on what design solutions are possible. This will allow you to benefit most from the experience and creativity of the architect. Rather than being pushed into something you don't want, the architect should simply offer you options then be guided by your preferences in the development of the final design solution which should feel like your own.

This article just touches on some of the issues that may be worthwhile considering when thinking about potential alterations to your home. Each house and site has its own possibilities and needs to be looked at on its own merits. Architecture at its best, whether a significant public building or a modest extension to a home has the potential to create delight and help invoke a spirit of well-being. ■

Alan McKay left Shetland to study architecture in the mid 1970s, and after qualifying and working in Aberdeen returned to Shetland in the mid 1980s. He worked with the Peter Johnson Partnership for 20 years, before starting his own practice in 2006, since when he has been busy with a range of small to medium sized projects.

The August Power of Place question:

Is there a renovated / extended building in Shetland you particularly like?

Text / phone to the Power of Place phone **07503596635**. Or you can also email your thoughts, opinions and photographs to **powerofplace@yahoo.co.uk** or by post to **Power of Place, Toll Clock Shopping Centre, Lerwick.**