How to green up your home

Part 6: Conservatories and extensions

SAM FOSTER ARCHITECTS

Every year a staggering 2.5m households up sticks and move, with all the upheaval and stress that it entails. Around 200,000 households decide to stay put and extend what they have by building an extension. In this article we're going to take a quick look at conservatories and extensions and how – if you're thinking of having one – you can make these as 'green' as possible.

You're probably thinking it yourself: surely it's greener not to extend at all? Absolutely, and it's worth spending a good bit of time really thinking of the space you have could simply be organised better. Oversized chairs and sofas, for example, make a room seem smaller than it is, while poorly-placed kitchen units and islands can limit where you might put a dining table. Sketching out a floor plan of your house – to scale – and then positioning cut-outs of your furniture is a good way of seeing quickly if you can do more with what you have.

If you've tried all that and you still need more space then there's a chance that a conservatory or extension might be the answer. How big can it be? Well, like the rest of the UK, we have something called 'Permitted Development' which allows extensions and conservatories up to a certain size to be built without planning permission. Search the internet for 'permitted development rights Scotland' for the latest guidance but be warned: if it's over this size you'll need planning permission.

You will also need something called a Building Warrant, which ensures that the design meets the current Building Regulations and an architect can talk you through all of this.

If you're thinking of extending then you should be prepared for a bit of mess and disruption while the work's being done. But – it's also a good time to do any other little bits of work to green up your home, such as draughtproofing, adding insulation, re-decoration etc. If your budget stretches, doing everything in one go costs less in the long run than doing things bit by bit, so it's worth it.

Conservatories

What is a conservatory? Generally it's an un-insulated structure on the side of a house (i.e. it is outside the 'insulated envelope' of your house) that has a lot of glass in its walls and roof, and which is separated from the main house by insulated doors.

Every year over 2.5m households move house, while around 200,000 households decide to extend, refurbish or improve their houses

They're typically used in the summer as an extra room and in the winter act as a buffer to reduce the amount of your house that's exposed to the weather, which helps to reduce heat loss. Their simplicity means that they must only meet a limited amount of the Building Regulations.

If you're thinking of building a conservatory then you should follow these three basic rules to get the best out of it:

- Make sure it faces south or west so that it gets the sun and helps shelter the house from our prevailing south-westerly winds (north-facing conservatories make good fridges…);
- DO NOT put radiators or underfloor heating in it! All the glass means any artificial heat you put in will be lost almost immediately.
- Make sure there are plenty of opening windows so that you can ventilate it when it gets a bit stuffy.

Conservatories usually come as pre-designed packages from companies who will take care of planning permission and a warrant, if required, and then the entire construction process from clearing the site and pouring foundations to all the painting and handing over the keys.

Extensions

Extensions tend to be more bespoke and designed specifically to meet your needs. The best bit about this is that they give you the opportunity to change the layout of your house. If your sitting room is on the cold, north side of the house, for example, why not put it into the south-facing extension?

Extensions form part of the 'insulated envelope' of the house, i.e. the bit you heat, and so full Building Regulations apply. These demand that the energy efficiency of the floor, walls, roof, windows and doors is very high, and even higher if your existing house is quite old and poorly insulated, so it should be very well insulated and draughtproof.

It's pointless though, having an energy efficient extension and a really draughty house and on this type of project we always recommend to clients that we aim to reduce the heat loss from the original house as part of the overall works. Draught-proofing is the most cost-effective way of reducing heat loss in buildings and, together with beefing up any insulation you already have, such as in the loft, it'll make a lot of difference to your heating bills.

The biggest impact that building a conservatory or extension will have will be on your outside space. There's just no getting around the fact that you're going to lose some garden space by building something.

But there's nothing saying that you can't reinstate the bit you've lost on the roof! It's not necessary to go mad with flowers and shrubs – and most councils are averse to letting folk create balconies on their flat roof extensions as they compromise privacy – but if you're building a single storey extension then how nice to look out of your upstairs windows over a bit of greenery with some wildlife rather than drab, grey tiles. It also slows down the speed that water runs off your roof, which can reduce the risk of flooding, and it dampens the sound of rain and hail on your roof.

SAM FOSTER
ARCHITECTS

01383 231818
info@samfosterarchitects.co.uk
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