

Preaching to the converted

There are millions of empty properties in the UK just waiting to be converted into a dream home. And you won't pay VAT on renovating a building that's been vacant for two years or more - now that's tempting

Finding a property is half the battle. But how do you know whether the property is suitable for a conversion into a dwelling? And what red-tape must you contend with for a conversion of this type?

John Burke, of Corryards Developments Ltd in Scotland, a specialist in converting old buildings into fantastic homes, has this advice: "When considering a purchase of an empty building or non-residential property with the view of converting it into a home, try and speak to as many people as possible who know the property.

"When you have established the current status of the building, now comes the fun part of imagining what the property could look like," continues John. "Can you see yourself living there, and how will you use your new home? The more time you spending examining the current status and thinking of the future state, the fewer pitfalls you will experience."

There will of course be red-tape to negotiate when buying an empty

property. John advises you seek 100% clarity on the following key questions:

- **Is the building listed?** And if so, what grade and with which body is it listed? Depending on the status of the listing, you will be restricted as to the extent of alternations which you can make to the building.
- **Will planning permission be required?** Speak to architects and builders to get their view, speak to the local planning officer and see if they can offer an early opinion. Consider "what if" scenarios, such as "what if I don't get planning permission?"
- **What is the current value of the property,** as opposed to the listed selling price? Does it offer good value? What are the likely development costs?

Once you have done your homework, and answered all of the above questions to the best of your ability, you're ready to take next steps. As John says, "it is likely you will require planning permission, especially if it is a listed building, or if the extent of your renovations are considerable".



"A good architect will be able to advise on what you can do under permitted development [without requiring planning permission]," adds John. "I also advise clients to prepare a Stakeholder Plan, outlining all the people and organisations you need to engage with throughout the various stages of the project, and a strategy on how to manage each stakeholder.

"You need to be crystal clear what you need from each stakeholder – for example, the neighbour with an adjoining property would be a key stakeholder with specific concerns. Be clear what success looks like, which could be that the neighbour does not object to the planning application," John adds.

John offers the following strategies to help usher planning consent through:

- **Communicate** with your neighbours at the earliest stage and tell them what your intentions are.
- **Be open and transparent** at all times, and try to put yourself in their shoes. How would you feel if someone was going to carry out renovations next door to your house? If it means putting an empty or derelict building back into use, most people will be in favour, but you should consider the impact of your design, how you can



minimise disruption, and future use issues such as shared access or common land around your properties.

- **Offer** to show them your designs and ask their opinion – they will feel part of the project, people generally love being asked their opinions!
- **Communicate regularly** to update them on progress. Notify them if there will be a large delivery of materials or noisy machinery will be used, for instance.

And there are a couple of final things to think about. "You could build energy-saving measures into your renovation," John suggests. "They generally cost more, but if you are planning to live in the property for at least five years then they will be worth it."



It's important too to consider where the building is. "If it's in an area of natural beauty, conservation area or national park, then there will be certain restrictions on what you can and can't do in your conversion. Your architect or builder should be able to advise," says John.

Be warned, taking on an older building which has not been lived in before, or at least for a long time, is not for the faint-hearted. "If you are the type of person who wants an easy life with no hassle, converting an old empty building may not be for you," cautions John. "But if you want a truly unique home, where your efforts and hassles have added significant value to the property, then renovation is the path for you."



AVOID EMPTY PROMISES

John Burke of Corryard Developments offers a list of some of the most common mistakes incurred when carrying out a conversion. Make sure you avoid the following five pitfalls when renovating an old, empty building:

- Not engaging a competent builder who has experience in similar projects, and who can 'think outside the box' and solve problems proactively throughout the project.
- Not engaging an architect – architects spend six years at university studying design and architecture for good reason. I know, because I married one! Don't make the mistake of not engaging an experienced architect to try and save money. A good architect will make the best use of the space available, will see things that you don't see, and will open your eyes to the possibilities. Be warned, like builders, not all architects are the same, so take the time to select the right one for you. Go and see some of their designs and past work, and definitely speak to their previous clients.
- Not having an enough funds to finish the project – conversion projects are generally more expensive than standard new builds, but the end result is so much more rewarding. Do your sums and, to be safe, get a quantity surveyor to check them,
- Not having a contingency. See the point above, and add 10% in case something goes wrong, or you uncover something unexpected. Inadequate foundations, dry rot or even roosting bats are all quite common when converting an older property or one that has lain empty for some time.
- Don't try to live in the property at the same time as the work is being carried out. This will be stressful, cold and damp, and probably not safe!



TOP TRANSFORMATIONAL TIPS

John Burke of Corryard Developments offers the following checklist to increase the chances that your conversion project will all go smoothly:

- **Before purchasing** your building, learn as much about the property as you possibly can, dig deep to find all the information about the property from multiple sources – owners, neighbours, estate agents, local planners, local builders and engineers. All will have different views, and it's up to you to get a clear and detailed picture of the current status of the property.
- **Make sure** you appoint an experienced building company – and don't be taken in by any of the cowboys out there! When considering hiring a building contractor, make sure you see some of their recent work, and speak directly to past clients. Check if they have won any awards for their work; always an excellent benchmark of quality.
- "Move in in haste, repent at leisure" is my motto. **Take your time** to get it right, resist any pressure, and don't set yourself unrealistic targets. The birth of a child or Christmas may seem like deadlines you need to beat, but these things can't be moved if you encounter time overruns. The more thinking and planning you do upfront the better the end product will be. Be brave and think big, but be flexible too so you don't get disheartened if the project goes temporarily off course.

Corryard Developments Ltd is an FMB member firm from Crieff in Perthshire. Visit their website at www.corryard.com to find out more or to contact them.



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