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What's in a garage?

If you take a peek into someone's garage, what would you see? A car or a load of old junk piled up from floor to ceiling? We all know the answer and the reason for it is just as simple - the average single garage is around 150sqft and, when you put your car in it, there is not enough room to open the doors. And, if you own a 4x4 you will probably rip the roof off if you try to drive it into the garage. The result? You park your car on the drive and treat your garage like a loft, filling it with all manner of things that you really ought to throw away.

The good news is that converting a garage into a living space is one of the cheapest and simplest ways to extend a house and often doesn't even require planning permission (although you should always check with your local planning authority). It will, however, require Building Regulations approval. A typical single garage conversion costs between £10-£15,000 and you can add another £5,000 on top of that for a double garage, which is around half as much as building a brand new extension.

If you've got a garage or are thinking about buying a house with one, the first thing to do is to look at its build quality, which can vary wildly. Clearly it will be more costly to convert an old lean-to arrangement, riddled with asbestos, rather than a good quality one made of brick. There are quite a few different configurations, including double garages, which you can also part convert and detached garages, which will almost certainly need planning permission for change of use. The next issue is to decide exactly what it is that you want to do with the space. There are lots of options, ranging from a dining room, a home office, an extension to the kitchen or even a games room. You should be able to find a local garage conversion specialist or two in your area. They will be able to give you some advice on what's best for your individual circumstances, but make sure that you speak to several of them and check their references before making a commitment.

These issues need to be addressed during the build process, especially the insulation, which is covered by Building Regulations. On the bright side, the boiler is often housed in the garage and that means that bringing in pipes for heating and hot water is neither expensive nor complicated.

One of the most important aspects of any garage conversion is to make sure that it doesn't end up looking like a converted garage, which look awful and might even devalue the house. That means that you need to match the house's original materials and windows as closely as possible, as well as stitching in the brickwork. Additionally, many garages have a flat roof. If it is possible, a pitched roof looks much better and has the added benefit of providing extra head height, with storage space above it for all the junk that you didn't throw away during the garage clearance.

A good tip for those who are worried about losing too much storage space during the conversion process, is to close an off area at the far end of the garage for storing lawnmowers etc. Ideally it should have an access door to either the side or the garden. You can, of course, put up a shed in the garden to accommodate any overflows.

So does it add any value to the house? The answer is a qualified yes. Living spaces tend to be more highly valued than parking spaces. As an additional bonus, a garage is normally connected to the house via the corridor, which is considered to be more valuable than if it had been connected to another room. However, with the costs of parking rising and ever increasing competition for parking spaces, this is a delicate balance in some areas. Fortunately, many houses with garages also have driveways. If that is the case, you will still have the all-important off-street parking, even after a garage conversion.

Finally, it is easy to do a garage conversion badly, so make sure that if you are doing one, that you do it properly.

Because garages are designed to house cars, there are some common problems when converting them into living spaces. They rarely have any form of insulation, often have flat and leaky roofs, poor or no foundations and floor levels that are lower than the rest of the house.

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