



# House & Home

FTWeekend

**Lost in lockdown** Bold, bright design from the fairs we missed – **FEATURE** PAGES 14 & 15

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## Tricks and mortar

Being confined has made us aware of the limitations of our homes. Here are four life-enhancing projects to plan and design now. *By Helen Barrett*

Lockdown 2020 made interior designers of us all. We did not necessarily want an entirely new house, but small inconveniences became enormous daily irritants. If only that home office were private, quiet and well organised, rather than a makeshift desk on a landing; if only we had soundproofed the walls; if only we could eat plump ripe fruit from the garden instead of queuing for hours to buy rosey produce; if only we had a plunge pool.

Whatever our desires, we wished we had got around to planning and designing them years ago, and we craved the moment when they could be commissioned. Now, as we – and architects, designers and builders – head cautiously back to work, the time is right to make a start. We asked five experts to guide us through the principles of designing and commissioning medium-sized projects that will enhance your home and your life, whatever the future may hold.

### An urban garden cabin with Maria Speake of Retrouvius

If working from home is to be the future of employment, garden office cabins are the obvious – and practical – projects to plan now. They offer the chance to concentrate in peace, near to but away from the domestic fray. Or perhaps a private room for exercise or creative endeavours, a welcoming retreat for winter months.

A seductive idea, particularly if you plan on kitting your cabin out with underfloor heating, a wood-burning stove and a generous vintage desk. But few end up used only for work, says Speake of architectural salvage company Retrouvius. The House & Garden designer of the year has planned and installed several bespoke cabins: “They end up having deck chairs stored in them, so they must be prepared in such a way that those bits can be incorporated and stored. Otherwise it will turn into a junk shed.”

The best, she says, are well-insulated and designed with generous storage to allow them to be multifunctional – a guest bedroom one week, a yoga studio the next – and accommodate changing enthusiasms and creative projects.

Basic cabins are straightforward. “A good DIY-er could do a cabin project themselves,” says Speake. Others may want to commission architects and planners.



**A cabin should have storage space incorporated. ‘Otherwise it will turn into a junk shed’**

Some cabins may require planning permission, depending on size, location usage and the approach of local officers, among other things. In the UK, says Speake, planners tend to interpret the rules differently from authority to authority, considering factors such as height and whether the cabin is accessible from the house. Other structures may fall under permitted development rights. Check with local planning authorities before you begin building.

The ideal cabin size is at least 3m deep by 5m wide, with additional storage and planting space. External proportions, says Speake, matter less, particularly in a city garden. “The ideal cabin length is

the full width of the back of the garden to maximise the space.” Otherwise, she says, the gloomy passages between cabin and garden walls “end up as foxes’ dens, or a dumping ground, and you can’t plant there because it is dry and dark”. A full-width cabin is also preferable proportionally, she says, when viewed from the house.

“Make sure you can plant it up and that plants can climb. Your cabin may have a flat roof, but you don’t want to look down on that from an upstairs window, so use the roof as a planting space for wild grasses, meadow flowers or spring bulbs. That way, you will be looking down on something very special.”

One option is to install a refurbished structure, such as a vintage railway carriage. Many in the UK, says Speake, were bought by householders to use as makeshift summer houses in the 1960s from railway companies after the government closed a third of British railway stations, a project known as the “Beeching cuts”.



(Above and left) A cabin can be used as an office, a winter retreat or summer guest house; this one is by Retrouvius for a private client; Butter Wakefield (top right) and her Ribbon Wheel garden for a Bayswater townhouse (above right)

© Kappy Hawkes

Speake says these old models are easy to convert and may turn up on eBay or for sale in salvage yards. “Often they put another roof structure over the carriages. That is good, because it means the original carriage has been protected.”

Others may prefer a David Cameron-style reproduction shepherd’s hut, which can start from about £5,000. “Shepherd’s huts can take a lot of the hassle out of it, and they are great if you are not into DIY.” Most are straightforward to assemble from a flat pack, or could be commissioned ready-made and craned up and over a terraced house at a cost of about £2,000.

Speake advocates yet more visual connection with your cabin’s garden setting. “The whole language of materials can be rougher and more raw in a cabin than in a house. For example, you can use old floorboards as cladding, and cedar shingle on the outside.”

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