

Architect George Bradley on the perfect side return

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Side return extensions are a response to what we're inheriting as a housing stock in this nation, says George Bradley, one half of Bradley

Van Der Straeten Architects. The UK is filled with very similar typology of Victorian terraces, which is where side returns are most commonly added. Hats off to the Victorians, but we think this design needs a reinvention to accommodate contemporary living.

One key aspect to any good side return is the ceiling. Often people think about getting a larger footprint, but a side return extension also provides an opportunity to do something different in terms of light, and a lot of that comes down to how the ceiling is treated. A well-designed ceiling encourages you to look up, notice the sky and feel more in tune with the outside than you would in a typical box room.

Planning starts with your living habits. Many of our clients are people with children and the way



The light-filled extension at Vault House

they want to live is an open-plan concept. They want to be able to share the same space, rather than some being hidden away in a separate kitchen while the rest of the family is spending quality time together in the living area. Everyone's requirements are different though, which is why our side returns look so different from one another – different ways of living can be translated into very unique projects.

Work with an architect who is willing to push your design. Taking a step back and having a conversation with an architect or a designer who can expand your mindset beyond the typical side return can be invaluable. That person can bring something else to the table that you might not have considered before. A builder will rely on the things they know, whereas an architectural designer can take a solution to another level. Find the right match for you by looking on the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) website.

Have the party wall built astride the boundary, if you can. You can save around 150cm of floor space compared to if you only build up to the boundary. The key to note here is building astride the boundary is to the neighbours' advantage, because when they come to build an extension themselves, they get to use the wall, too.

Start with your dream, and work out a plan from there. One of our favourite side return extension projects is called Bladerunner House. Here, the homeowners had a love for the Brutalist architecture of the Southbank Centre in London, so we incorporated concrete blades to divide up the large roof light in the side return, framing the light beautifully. Another standout extension project for us is Vault House – a truly stunning example of how sculptural vaulted ceilings can help create form, volume and light.

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