

# Welcome to the house of fun

Living with teens' thundering feet and slamming doors can be no fun, but one family designed their way out of the problem. Caroline Ednie finds out how. Pictures: Matt Laver

**A**iry, open-plan living spaces tend to dominate the modern home, but there are some situations when big social layouts become more of a bane than a boon. Lesley and Brian Knox discovered this when their teenage daughter Ella and her friends began to outnumber and out-decibel them in their Edinburgh mews house.

"When they came round to watch TV or play music, it just didn't work. It was too noisy," says Lesley, an investment company manager.

The Knoxes' compact home offered little opportunity to provide additional space for Ella and her pals to hang out. Then a much meatier proposition presented itself.

"There was a silversmith's studio across the lane, which the owner subsequently vacated. And when I saw a For Rent sign appear, I

thought, "That's just what I need - a large room opposite for Ella and her friends," Lesley says. "So we rented it, painted it and, a few months later, the new owner then decided to sell it. This was a killer, as we had occupied it just long enough to realise it was a great place to have. So, although we hadn't intended to, we ended up buying the studio and the cellar below, which belonged to a neighbouring property."

Lesley's idea was to combine the ground-floor studio and basement to create, in essence, a small house, and more specifically living quarters for Ella, 16 (pictured right, top). "We wanted an architect who would be interested in doing something fun and challenging." And this is what the Knoxes got when they asked architect Wil Tunnell to take on the redesign.

"The vaulted cellar was disconnected to the ground floor above, and that was a conundrum," Tunnell says. "Our proposal involved cutting into the vaults in order to create two bedrooms and bathroom in the basement. We were keen to retain the vaults, as they have real value and beauty, and we wanted to celebrate the cellar's nature as a subterranean space."

The construction eventually resulted in a ground-floor flat with an open-plan living room, kitchen and dining area, with stairs leading to the vaulted space beneath with two bedrooms. Light and ventilation have been cleverly pulled into the underground space via glazed slots cut into the



vaulted ceiling, and light chutes at pavement level - one the original coal chute, the other newly created.

"I never thought the space would feel as big as this," Ella says. "I just couldn't visualise it at all."

So how does her new bolt hole measure up? "Me and my friends use the basement a lot more because we can make a lot of noise without disturbing people. We alternate between playing my Wii, watching DVDs or listening to music, and now

mum doesn't have to put up with us being loud. I love it here because I can have sleepovers with quite a big group and, although I feel independent, I know that I'm near enough to my parents to feel safe."

"The arrangement is that they check in and out with us," Lesley says. "But they can make as much noise as they want and we can get to sleep. It's certainly been popular with Ella and her friends, and there is the added attraction

that it's right in the centre of town."

There's lots of hidden storage and built-in furniture, including the change in floor level that provides a timber seating ledge. Hard-wearing materials such as the rubber floors in the kitchen and bathroom, and oak flooring elsewhere, help Ella manage the morning-after clean-up. One design feature Ella admits caused a bit of a "whoa moment" is the reinforced glass panel in the living

room floor (which effectively pulls light into the bathroom below). "But I'm used to it now."

The decorative flourishes are down to Lesley. These include a large oil painting dominating the living area and pieces from the family's collection of Islamic pottery. But it's the space rather than the decor that swings it for Ella. "I'm a teenager, so I'm not that bothered about what it looks like. The main thing is, it's a great place to hang out."



## GROWING PAINS

Design tips for living with teenagers, from architect Wil Tunnell

**1** Create space conducive to gathering. Most people grow into armchairs only in middle age. An aversion to using chairs can be addressed by making changes in floor level at seat height, as this allows for a group of friends to sit around without having to fill the space with furniture. Floors with cushions are much more comfortable, so check out the very cool new Piggy beanbag, £59, from made.com.

**2** It's important to design a flexible living space that can grow up as its occupants do. Ella currently uses the basement for parties. However, the subterranean bedrooms are also calm, providing "quiet space" that keeps sound in as well as out.

**3** A feeling of owning the space is important. Avoid relegating teens to windowless cells at the farthest corner of a house. Daylight and outlook are a fundamental feel-good factor for everyone.

**4** Choose durable, low-maintenance surfaces, such as rubber floors in kitchens and bathrooms and solid oak floors in living areas.

**5** Sleeping areas should be cosy - they're still children, so spatial and physical warmth are essential.

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