In the start of a major new series for those taking on old houses, Natasha Brinsmead reveals the key ways to find the right house for you.

**GETTING STARTED**

All renovation projects start, of course, with a house that needs some work. It might indeed be the house you’ve lived in for years, or it might be that a house has caught your eye on account of its location or acreage. It might simply be because you want to make your own individual mark on a house, or perhaps it’s because you want to climb the property ladder by adding value. Whatever the motivation, the original house is key, because if you choose badly, then your work will almost certainly be in vain. So what you’re after is that magic word – ‘potential’ – and assessing that from the hundreds of thousands of properties for sale each year isn’t as easy as you might otherwise think.

**HOW TO FIND ONE**

In the world of property search engines, the key is not so much finding properties as sifting through what’s on offer. Not all agents recognise the potential that some homes have, so be generous in your parameters — two bedroom detached bungalows being a good starting point for small homes on bigger plots that have lots of scope for improvement, for example. Also, drive around and identify potentially empty properties — track down the owners, who may be willing to sell to you in order to save on estate agent’s fees. Also, don’t forget the key marketplace for run-down homes — auctions (see right).

**AUCTIONS**

Auctions remain the best source of homes in need. Identify the key auctioneers in your area through the local press, or check out plotfinder.net for details on larger, regional auction houses (Allsops and Roy Pugh being two).

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**INFO**

As not all renovations require planning permission, it is difficult to get exact figures, but current estimates suggest that around 300,000 homes are renovated or extended each year.
**Assessing Potential**

Before you even begin to assess the structural condition of a property, there are a few basic things to ask yourself. Is it in a good location? This could mean that it is in an area known for its good schools or transport links, away from any main roads or next to land that is likely to be bought up by a developer. Check out the scope for off-road parking where there isn't any and whether neighbouring properties have been recently extended (indicating that local planners are open to the idea). These are all things that are fixed and can't be changed, unlike rotten windows and a damp problem.

Once you have ascertained whether or not it is worth even stepping foot in the property, an assessment of the structural condition of the house is essential — not only in order to work out how much work is going to be required or whether it is even a viable project, but also to give an idea of whether the asking price is a fair one. Often there seems to be a premium for houses in need of modernisation and often, once the costs of the renovation have been taken into account, the figures do not stack up. Even if you are confident that you can spot any structural defects, unless you are a very experienced renovator (or a surveyor), you should always commission a building report from a Chartered building surveyor before buying. However, bear in mind that a surveyor will not be able to uncover any hidden problems and will not usually give an idea of the costs of the works required. Arm yourself with a checklist of the most common problems found in old properties and what it is likely to cost to put them right. There’s one on the following pages — but bear in mind you’ll almost certainly get a few surprises once you move in.

**Values**

The cost of any works should make sense when compared to the end value of the finished house (which you can get from the selling agent). While getting fixed costs before you have bought is impossible, do check out homebuilding.co.uk for ideas on task costs (e.g. rewiring). We’ll also be looking at costs in-depth in a later issue.

**Design Potential**

The first place that most people would go for design help is a professional designer or architect, but it doesn’t make sense to spend on design fees before buying a house — so the duty falls on you, the potential homebuyer, to work out what can be done in the name of renovation and improvement.

Firstly, what are the basic things that need to be done in design terms to bring the house you’re considering up to your requirements? How many extra bedrooms or bathrooms will it need? What about kitchen size (the smaller kitchens common in older properties being the number one ‘room for improvement’)? These ‘essentials’ will form the basis of any renovation works (although don’t assume they necessarily require an extension to achieve).

Secondly, number and size of rooms aside, what are the problems with the layout and look internally? Do the rooms flow? Have previous extensions created ‘corridor’ rooms that seem awkward? What about orientation and room positioning? Do the main living areas overlook the garden or view? What about the position of what will become the master bedroom? Is the only bathroom downstairs?

Lastly, consider the exterior. Assess windows not just for rot, but aesthetically. Can the external cladding be improved? Is then room in the roof for conversion? Is the garden big enough?

All of this will help you begin to form an idea of what you would want to do to the property — planning permission allowing (see later).

**Money-Saving Tip**

If you’re needing finance, your lender will insist on a valuation. If you also want a full structural survey, tell your lender to see if your chosen surveyor or is on their panel for valuation reports and, if not, if they could recommend one locally who is. It saves paying for two different surveys, saving £100s

**A Structural Survey to Assess a Home's Condition Will Cost Around £500 (Find One at Ricsfirms.com While a Lender's Homebuyer's Report, Giving You Little More Than a Valuation, Will Cost £150-300**

**A Bit of Imagination**

Homes come in all different forms and so do renovation projects. In this case, a 1930s home has been given a very modern makeover. Approaching projects with a bit of imagination is critical to unlocking potential.

**It Doesn’t Make Sense to Spend on Design Fees Before Buying a House — So the Duty Falls on You**
Complete Guide to Renovating a House

Structural Checklist

Rewiring
Electrics in old buildings will often require updating – look out for old-fashioned fuse boxes, light switches, round pin plugs and fabric-coated flex. To rewire a typical three bedroom terrace measuring around 100m² will cost between £2,500-3,000. This should include removing the old wiring, installing a new consumer unit and lifting and replacing the floorboards. It will not include re-plastering.

No Heating
No radiators in a house should immediately alert you to the fact that there is no heating system in place. Sometimes, there may be electric storage heaters instead. Adding a wet radiator, gas central heating system to a three bedroom terrace will cost around £2,500-5,000.

Dry and Wet Rot
This is a type of fungus that can destroy timber. Loving badly ventilated conditions, it is often found in the roof space or under floorboards in old houses. Look out for cotton wool-type masses and a strong musty smell when you lift the carpet. Getting rid of it will cost around £1,000. Wet rot is not so much of a problem, occurring in timber exposed to high levels of moisture. Timber will feel spongy to touch and dry timber will crumble easily. The problem should not return if damp problems are solved and ventilation is improved.

Cracks
Although people immediately assume all cracks are bad, they are not always the sign of subsidence. Cracks which are in just a single brick or are in

info
The time between an auction property going on the market and being sold is usually no more than four weeks — so act fast. You’ll need to arrange finance, viewings and legals as soon as possible.

know this
An easy way to check the age of a home’s electrical system is to go on a little hunt for the consumer unit. If the property has one, chances are it has been rewired in the past decade or so.

Subsidence

Subsidence does not always mean there is no hope for a property. Tell-tale signs include big cracks that seem to have grown from smaller ones, particularly when they get wider and appear in the corners of window and door openings. Cracks that are more than 3mm wide in the exterior of a building should also raise the alarm. Look too for rippling in the wallpaper that has not been caused by damp and doors and windows that have begun to stick (although timber does contract naturally, too).

According to a Halifax survey, 70% of subsidence cases are caused by tree roots. Other causes include leaking drains and in rare cases, older properties that have been built over mines or quarries.

If subsidence is revealed, the main issue will be that it will be hard to obtain buildings insurance. The options are to either try to buy the property at below the market price and pay for any relevant treatment yourself, then get insurance, which is likely to have a big premium. Or, get the seller to make a claim against their insurers, allowing work to be carried out under their policy.

In terms of treatment, all that may be needed is for trees to be removed or drains fixed. However if the building has already started to fail, then underpinning may be required, which could cost £10,000+.
Almost all properties have some potential for renovation — the key is assessing design and financial potential before committing. Be realistic about factors you can’t change, and be bold about what you can.

An assessment of a house you’re interested in should involve at least two viewings (one of which should be recorded for future analysis) so you can get as many questions answered as possible. A structural survey is a great starting point but you need to carry out a comprehensive analysis of where the key problems are, before turning your mind to the key areas for development might lie.

Almost all structural problems are solvable to some degree, but the more severe will impact on your ability to finance the project and insure the end result. The key is in getting the most out of viewings.