live well

OLGA TURNER ON HOW TO BUILD A WELLNESS-FOCUSED EXTENSION

Considering health and wellbeing holistically when building an extension means thinking about what you want to get out of it, what materials to use and how to furnish the space.

Both thermal and acoustic comfort are two things to think about from the beginning. In terms of thermal comfort, buildings are so airtight that it's not just about how you heat a space, but how you cool it, too. When you're insulating, look at something called an MVHR system. What that does is constantly keep the air fresh without losing heat, due to a heat transfer unit. As long as you have an external wall, which extensions by their very nature tend to have, then you can fit one in. Make sure the MVHR system has a filter on it so that you're getting the cleanest air possible back into the space.

If the extension is to be a retreat, perhaps an antidote to an open-plan space, think about acoustic insulation. Cork has really good insulation and acoustic properties. If there's a floor above, line that with cork to dull the noise of footfall or, if it's a one-level extension, you can use it between rooms.

Think about how well doors and windows acoustically insulate from outside. When you're choosing, don't just ask about its U-value, also ask about its acoustic performance – particularly if you live below a flight path or on a busy room.

To make sure that your extension is a really usable space, think about lighting – not only directly, but from above. Skylights are much better at letting in light than vertical windows, so even if you have a small window in the roof instead of huge wall-to-wall glazing, you're going to get more daylight in.

In terms of fitting out the space, try to use materials that are natural and non-toxic. The most important things to watch out for are fire retardants, which are really bad for air quality and release chemicals.

Most paints on the market release volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which can harm your respiratory health, so go for a paint that's certified to be low in or free from VOCs. If you want to avoid paint altogether, clay plaster is fantastic at absorbing moisture, has good acoustic properties and is great for air quality – check out the range at UK brand Clayworks. Another option is natural breathable lime plaster, like Breathaplasta, which is really good for regulating humidity. So if the space is going to be an open-plan kitchen-diner/living space, it's ideal to use a natural plaster or clay because of the humidity you get from cooking.

Needless to say, in kitchens, make sure you ventilate properly. Don't just get a system which sucks things up into the cooker hood, have it externally ventilated and expel the air outdoors.

Remember that sustainability doesn't always equal wellness. For example, hyper-insulating without ventilating. The more you insulate, the more you should ventilate.

Formaldehyde is still not banned in high levels from furnishings, so developers and manufacturers are still using timber which is actually toxic to us. If you're extending bedrooms and building in wardrobes, use FSC certified solid wood, not MDF or anything composite. If you're doing any joinery, ask the manufacturer if it has been tested for VOCs and formaldehyde before you buy.

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