

Extensions in the shape of urban foxes or ceilings folded like a concertina — this is the year that home improvement goes left-field. With moving costs high and a dearth of stock on the market, the vogue for staying put and making the most of what you have remains strong, particularly because it is possible to make significant alterations without the need for permission, after the relaxation of planning legislation.

The need for more space is the driving force behind these changes — and the UK's leading architects are finding new ways to work.

The big extension trend of the Noughties was for "straight across" glass boxes, which involved removing the back wall of a house, pushing it outwards and installing a wall of bifold doors. These extensions work well in providing extra light and space, but the expanse of glass reduces privacy doesn't inspire on grey and rainy days (or at night) and can look a little forgettable.

However, things are changing, with bespoke builds taking over. When asked to extend a house in Islington, north London, the architect David Kohn opted for a red-brick structure (bricks being in vogue this year) with a profile inspired by the urban foxes that prowl the garden. A porthole window serves as the animal's eye.

The resulting space is pleasingly unconventional in a row of Identikit Victorian semis. Inside the space is light, offers views of the garden and makes a great communal kitchen/living room for a family home.

The playful project took second place in this year's Don't Move, Improve! awards, run by New London Architecture. The awards highlight the

best home-improvement projects of the year. The overall winner was the House of Trace, in Lewisham, southeast London, by Tsuruta Architects.

An aversion to what Stephen Chance, of Chance de Silva, describes as "the standard extension box" drove the design for an extension and garden room at a house in Stroud Green, north London.

The extension wraps around the back of the property and has been staggered to give it an irregular profile. The diagonal walls and sloping roof planes on the garden room not only look great but help with the acoustics — the owners plan to use it as a music studio.



The theme of irregularity has been turned into an art form at a three-storey terraced house in Crouch End, north London, where a side and rear extension creates space for a kitchen and living room.

The architect Bureau de Change included a "pleated" ceiling above the kitchen, which helps to zone the area but also has a practical purpose.

Billy Mavropoulos, the director of Bureau de Change, says the design was inspired by "an original conversation with the client. Beyond the garden are some really beautiful tall trees and the clients wanted to be able to see them from the living area, which is behind the kitchen."

The solution was to concertina the ceiling and insert skylights, providing the much wanted view.

Mavropoulos believes that people are increasingly open to unusual and individual designs. "They come to us and say they want an extension but they don't want a box. They want something with character and a narrative behind it. They are design-conscious," he says.

The conservatory — cold in winter, boiling in summer and with endless frames blocking views — is another



Neil Dusheiko Architects included a glass flooring panel in this extension, above, while the exterior of the extension, top right, by David Kohn Architects was inspired by urban foxes. Both were shortlisted for New London Architecture's Don't Move, Improve! prize. Simon Gill Architects replaced a conservatory with a Siberian-larch clad extension, left



Extensions by Architecture for London, above, and Platform 5 Architects, inset left, were shortlisted for the NLA awards

extension that has fallen out of favour. In Roehampton, southwest London, the architect Simon Gill replaced one of these chilly glass boxes with a double-height timber extension.

Its Siberian larch cladding has been steam bent using traditional boat-building techniques, giving a curved effect, and the hard-wearing, low-maintenance wood should weather to a lovely silver-grey over time.

With about 14 per cent of people working from home, according to the Office for National Statistics, finding space for a peaceful home office is often the reason for a house renovation.

Abigail Ashton and Andrew Porter, of Ashton Porter Architects, turned to the back garden when they were hired to remodel a house in Enfield, north London, replacing a shed with a writing hut for the owner, a children's author.

The back façades of the house and the hut have been designed to mirror one another, with statement aluminum-framed windows facing each other at opposite ends of the garden.

If a full-scale extension is too expensive or seems like too much bother, but if you need extra space, you could steal an idea from the architect Simon Conder, who was hired to build an extraordinary rubber-clad house in Dungeness, Kent.

Constrained by strict planning rules on the shingle headland, which prevented him enlarging the property, he sourced a retro 1954 Airstream caravan, a design classic in its own right, which is now parked beside the house to provide a guest room. Similar caravans can be