

MAXIMISING SPACE

Why London-based Benchmark Lofts is a cut above the competition



Company director Thomas Payne is so confident in the quality of his team's workmanship that he has done eight loft installations on his own street – and business comes mainly through word-of-mouth. Since launching Benchmark Lofts Ltd he has completed over 200 projects, has a five-star rating from clients and offers 100% quality assurance. 'We pride ourselves in consistently doing a great job,' explains Thomas. 'All our clients are residential property owners, so we're helping people create more space in their houses for growing and changing families or home offices. We're very respectful that we're

working in people's homes, we're tidy, friendly and we protect their existing spaces. I have a great team of guys and we offer a premium service. Quality is at the heart of everything we do and nothing is rushed.'

DECADES OF EXPERIENCE

Thomas grew up in Suffolk and did an apprenticeship in carpentry before spending some time living in New Zealand and working as a carpenter on timber-frame houses. After returning to the UK, he

founded his own business in London in 2012. Since then, Benchmark Lofts has grown steadily with clients across the city, particularly the various districts of south-east London. The team help customers maximise the space in their Victorian terrace or end-terrace houses. 'These types of properties often don't have very big outdoor spaces or gardens, so extending might not be an option,' explains Thomas. 'The only way to build is upwards!' He explains that for many customers, a loft conversion can present a better alternative to the costs and stresses of moving to a larger house. When taking into account London property prices, the cost of stamp duty alone could cover the price of a loft conversion.

A PREMIUM SERVICE

From the start, Thomas says he wanted to focus on providing customers with high-quality, well-designed and innovative builds. He explains: 'Some loft installation companies have quite a bog-standard approach; they tend to work to a one-size-fits-all model in terms of their fixtures and finish. We are very different and take a much more bespoke and individualised approach.' Benchmark Lofts focuses on the details that suit the needs of the homeowners. Most conversions include a bedroom, bathroom, and perhaps a second bedroom or office space, but Thomas says he's full of ideas to make the most of whatever space is available. 'We put a lot of thought into it,' he explains. 'I have lots of conversations with clients and suggest ideas that might work well for them and the space they have got. And even during the build itself – if we spot a better way to do something, we will always flag it up.'

Ideas might include innovative storage space, wardrobes and joinery, or making the most of the lighting with a different type of window. 'There's a lot of dead space in a loft because of the sloping roof, so we work to maximise the space where people can stand upright, and then use the smaller corners and lower areas to maximise storage,' he says. 'We take into account things like head clearance and depth as people walk about the room.' This extends to the planning of bathrooms or en-suites too.

Benchmark Lofts has architects and engineers who draw up detailed plans, and then Thomas himself meets the homeowners to discuss the designs and ask lots of questions about how the space will be used. 'Post-Covid we saw a rise in people wanting extra space because they needed a home office,' he says. 'Or it might be a family with teenage children who need their own space at the top of the house.'

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Thomas highlights that he always provides a detailed and itemised quote, including all fixtures and fittings, so there are no hidden surprises. 'We try to provide lots of extra information on the plans and finishes,' he says. 'We make detailed written plans and during the build our team work very carefully to those plans.' Once a contract is agreed, Thomas asks for a 5% deposit, but stipulates that the final payment won't be required until after Building Control have signed off on the finished build, and that cost is included. Benchmark Lofts also deals with any planning applications needed before work begins and can advise customers regarding party walls. 'About 90% of the decisions are made before any work starts,' says Thomas. 'It means customers know exactly what they're getting and have signed off on a clear timeframe.'

WELL-EXECUTED PROJECTS

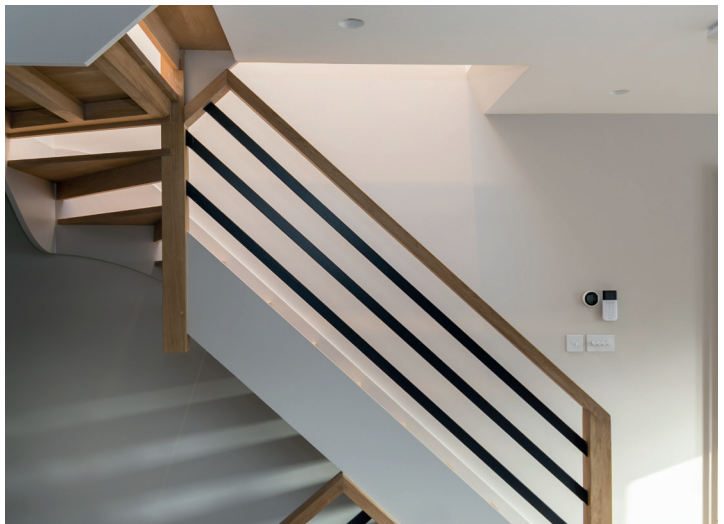
The build itself takes around 9 to 11 weeks, and Thomas says his team are very conscious that families tend to be continuing to live in their houses while work is ongoing. The first thing they do once on-site is





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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENCHMARK LOFTS

the prep work to make sure any throughfares, such as hallways and landings, and outdoor spaces like patios, are protected. Thomas says: 'Our team are nice people to have around: clean, tidy and respectful. That really matters when you have workmen in your home.' As director, Thomas oversees the projects, making sure everything runs to time, liaising with different contractors and sourcing the best materials from premium and trusted suppliers.

After any prep work, scaffolders come in and a temporary 'tin hat' roof is fitted so the build is protected throughout the duration of the project – rather than just using tarpaulin. After the demolition of the existing roof and loft space, builders get to work on the structure, including bricklaying, plaster-boarding, initial plumbing and electrics and a new roof. The average loft conversion costs between £75,000 to £125,000, although some projects with roof terraces can be more ambitious, and the price will reflect the sheer complexity of the work that goes into it. Joiners, carpenters and tilers move in to start on the finish, and there will be a second round of electrical and plumbing work as the project nears completion.

FIVE-STAR FEEDBACK

The quality of the work carried out by Benchmark Lofts speaks for itself. Thomas says that the majority of his business comes through word-of-mouth, as satisfied customers recommend Benchmark to their friends across London. Closer to home, neighbours and parents at Thomas' daughter's school have told others how pleased they are with their loft conversions. 'When you're working this close to home,

it's absolutely crucial that you get it right,' he laughs. 'With eight loft conversions on my own street, everyone knows where I am!' He's happy to be contacted with any aftercare issues, but says customer satisfaction is high and he's proud of his firm's 'good name'. There is currently around a six-month wait for prospective new customers and the firm builds around 20 lofts a year.

Benchmark Lofts has been a member of the Guild of Master Craftsmen for around two years, with Thomas saying that it's testament to the skill and experience of the various tradespeople that make up his regular team of self-employed contractors. Lots of different skills and trades go into a loft conversion, from electricians and roofers to plumbers, tilers, carpenters, bricklayers and plasterers. 'It means there's a lot of variation to the work, so the projects are really satisfying,' says Thomas. 'Good feedback gives the team a lot of job satisfaction too. When we're consistently doing a nice job and our customers are happy, then it's a great environment to work in and we're happy.'

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