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Top Tips for a Great Basement Living Space

Basements have come a long way since the days of chilly, damp rec rooms with low ceilings, dark paneling and cast-off furniture.

Today's basements may have plush home theaters, weight rooms and saunas, climate-controlled wine cellars, lap pools and dance floors, along with bedrooms, baths and kitchenettes.

Finishing an unused lower level is a way to gain living space at a lower cost than adding to the footprint of the home. Even so, the nationwide average price tag for a basement remodeling/finishing project is around \$43,000. The actual cost depends on the homeowner's vision for the space and can easily top six figures, points out Karl Holtermann, project manager at Bartelt-Filo Design Build in metro Milwaukee.

Design and construction pros agree that with sound planning, creative thinking and today's newest building materials, it is possible to create a basement that is warm and comfortable, light and every bit as appealing as the main floor of the house.

Whether you are building a new home with a finished lower level or finishing the basement in your present house, here are some basic considerations to keep in mind.

Address dampness issues as the first step in a basement project so that flooding, mold or musty smells won't ruin your investment. Get a qualified professional to identify the source of any water problems, including seasonal seepage, and prescribe a fix. Install one or more sump pumps, with one powered by a battery or generator in case of a power failure. Use a dehumidifier and install proper ventilation for adequate air exchange.

Plan ahead and cluster your utilities and mechanical systems such as the furnace

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and hot water heater in one place, away from the living areas, to reduce noise and maximize the amount of finished space. Make sure all your contractors know of your plans for finishing the basement, so that wiring, plumbing, heating and cooling systems are made easily accessible with minimal impact on living space and available headroom.

Get your living space off of the cold concrete. Rick Angelico, a partner in Hampton RMR, a residential construction firm in Easthampton, N.Y., suggests installing a DRICore® subfloor. The DRICore system consists of interlocking 2- by 2-foot squares that are set directly on top of the concrete to form a floating floor over which carpet, vinyl, laminate or engineered hardwood may be installed.

"Because it's a wood product, it's softer to walk on than concrete," Angelico says. It's quick and easy enough for a do-it-yourselfer, he says, because it doesn't require any framing. "You just set the squares on top of the concrete and tap them together."

Let in the light. If you are building a new home, or planning an extensive remodel, specify generously-sized windows in walk-out or daylight basements. If you have an existing basement with a few tiny transom windows and a tight budget, you'll need to be more creative to achieve a light and inviting room. Consider using strategically placed spotlights to add drama.

Charles Riley, a New York interior designer who tackles basement projects with creativity and flair, suggests framing a large panel of frosted glass or other high quality translucent material to create a shoji screen effect. Install the panel, with a light behind it, in or against a basement wall and below a transom window to give the illusion of a full-length window through which filtered sunlight shines.

Don't skimp on quality. Create whatever style you desire, but be sure to finish the lower level with the same quality as the main floors of the home, Holtermann advises. That means drywall rather than paneling, and quality detailing and workmanship.

"You are making an investment in your home and in the quality of life," he says. "If a remodeled basement is a great source of enjoyment for your family, then the payback is measured in far more than monetary value."

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