

# When it comes to basement developments, **THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX**

BY HEATHER RYAN



**THEY ARE OFTEN THOUGHT OF AS DARK AND DINGY, COLD and musky, but they represent a good chunk of real estate that offers tremendous potential for adding more living space to your home.**

They are, of course, the basement: the lower level of your home that can be transformed with a little imagination, good planning and design into a space of your dreams.

Times have changed when it comes to basement development, says Brian Maurer, president and managing partner of Albi Renova. "We probably construct from 40 and upwards of 70 basements a year because people are choosing to stay in their homes longer and they want to make use of their empty basement."

"There was a time when basements were thought to be dungeons, dark and dreary, with low ceilings and people would often put them together piecemeal so they didn't get much use," he says. "But today, many new home builders are making them with nine-foot ceilings and bigger windows so they are nice and bright. Many people want the basement design to blend into the style they have upstairs, and in many cases they turn out to be even better than the upstairs."

**PICTURED ABOVE**  
A warm and inviting retreat. Renovation by Conklin Developments

**PICTURED TOP RIGHT**  
Custom built cabinetry by Ultimate Renovations transforms this walk-out basement, for tons of family entertaining.

**PICTURED BOTTOM RIGHT**  
Ultimate Renovations removed 100 truckloads of dirt to create their stunning Showhome walk-out basement on Lake Bona.

Like many homeowners contemplating a basement development the first question is often: where do you start?

"When you're standing there in that open space basically we tell people to think about how they want to use the space," says John McCoy, general manager of Ultimate Renovations. "When working with clients we try to get a sense of their lifestyle and family, and talk about what they want to achieve in the space."

"There has been a real transition in basement development over the past 10 years," he says. "In the past, you'd see basements that were developed with cheaper carpet, finishings, and they were more closed off, but now many people want to see it as a continuation of the upstairs with the same

quality, cabinetry, flooring and millwork, and they want that open look.

"So we're opening the flow to the basement by opening the stairwell so that you're not just looking down a narrow tunnel, you get to see a good portion of the room when you look down the stairs," McCoy says. "This creates a feeling of openness and a sense of space."

Maurer adds that homeowners should look at the space not just how they would use it now, but also five or 10 years from now. "If you want to have a toy room for the kids, remember that in five years it probably won't be used. We asked people to think about other uses for the room, maybe it can be turned into a computer room or exercise room."

As with any renovation you undertake, it all starts with a good design done by a qualified, reputable designer who knows construction and building codes, Maurer says.

"There are a lot of what we call pivot points in the basement, these are items such as support posts, furnace location, floor drains, plumbing, duct work, windows, electrical panels – all of these things need to be taken into account in the design," he says. "If you have a creative designer many of these can be hidden, such as the duct work can be blended to a ceiling treatment for a coffered ceiling look. Of course, you can move pivot points, like support posts, but it can cost up to \$10,000."

"We tell people to let us try to work out a design with the pivot points and their wish list and we'll come up with something that will work," Maurer says. "A lot of people have a preconceived idea as to what they think the basement will look like because of these pivot points, but we often come back with a design that is something different and much better."





## Most popular features for basement development



When it comes to basement development there are numerous ideas you can incorporate in the design, but what are some of the most popular? Here are some of the most popular items people including in their lower level.

### FIREPLACES

Whether starting the development from scratch or renovating a basement, one of the most popular items to add is a natural gas fireplace, according to Preston Meyer, co-owner of Hearth & Home Fireplace Specialties. "One of the biggest problems with basements is heat, and having a natural gas fire place or converting an old wood fireplace to natural gas, will keep the room warm," he says. "You can set the thermostat control on the fireplace, so it will come on and off and keep the basement at a comfortable level. It's also one of the most inexpensive ways to heat the basement, they are easy to install and you can finish them any way you like." Hearth & Home also provides a "turn key" operation, he says. "We can come into the home and do the entire installation, including the finishing, for you."

### HOME THEATRES

After the bedroom and bathroom, many people are opting to put in home theatres or media rooms in their basements. "A couple of years ago we were doing home theatres with the theatre row seating," says Gerry Goertzen, partner in Conklin Developments. "But now people don't want that as much as a comfortable place to sit, so we're seeing separate recliners or sections, and we're putting in multiple screens, so you can watch several games at once." And wiring (and pre-wiring for the future) is done to accommodate audio/visual equipment and sound surround systems, as well as lighting and security systems.

### WET BARS

Wet bars can be as simple as having a sink and fridge, and adding a small dishwasher and microwave, says Brian Maurer, president and managing partner of Albi Renova. "Most people want a place where they can pop pizza in the microwave, grab and beer and wash their hands."

### OTHER IDEAS

Games rooms with space for a pool table without having to go to short cues, and exercise rooms complete with cork or rubber floors, floor-to-ceiling mirrors and wall-mounted TVs, Maurer says.

On the other hand, McCoy says they encourage people to "think outside the box," when it comes to design.

"Most people look at support posts and they don't think they can do anything about them, they think they have to build around them. But in 99 per cent of those cases they can be moved and that opens the design opportunities in a huge way because you can look at using the whole space without limitations."

Want a bathroom in the opposite corner from where the plumbing is roughed in? McCoy says it can be moved, "although it would be more costly, so we try to look at where the plumbing is and work out from there, but given the technology today, we can really create anything you want."

Gerry Goertzen, partner in Conklin Developments, says most people "know what they want to create in their basement so we help them with the overall design.

"I'd say most people today want to have a downstairs bedroom, bathroom and media room with a wet bar," he says. "In many cases they're building the extra bedroom for the nanny instead of a guest room, because more people are hiring nannies rather than using day cares."

All the experts say that gone are the days of having dark and cold basements. Maurer says that many new homebuilders are "recognizing

**PICTURED ABOVE**  
Natural stone anchors the sports bar while metallic backsplash and chrome light fixtures add edge and personality to the space.

**PICTURED TOP RIGHT**  
Recessed light and dramatic bulkheads define space in this open concept basement. Richer tones and detailed wood paneling give this livable space innate warmth.

**PICTURED BOTTOM RIGHT**  
Detailed copper panels combined with stone and rich cabinetry create depth and character, transforming this large basement into an elegant retreat.

that buyers will at some point want to develop their basement, so they are installing larger windows than before."

"One of the biggest things we find is that people don't know how large the bedroom window in the basement needs to be so they're surprised when we tell them it needs to be larger in order to meet the code," Goertzen says. But he adds the problem can easily be overcome by digging out and enlarging the space for bigger windows.

Today's improved insulation, underlay and thick carpet means floors downstairs are warmer underfoot. Insulation in the walls also ensure warmth, and McCoy stresses the need for properly place heating and cold-air return vents that will keep the warm air circulating correctly in the space.

The addition of fireplaces continues to be popular in the basement, the experts say, and Maurer points out that many have thermostat controls to help keep the room warm.