

What is the most underutilized space in most homes? The answer is right under foot, it's your basement. For many the basement is a damp, musty space, devoid of natural light, disconnected from the rest of the home, useful only for storage. This is unfortunate, because I see the basement as useful lower level living space, and you should too.

Water management:

Moisture is the most common problem found in basements and left unattended can lead to noxious odors, constant frustration, and mold. If water is infiltrating your basement, its time to do some investigation:

1. Clean your gutters and downspouts to make sure they are clear of debris and directing water away from the foundation.
2. Look at the ground around your foundation to make sure it is properly sloping away from the house.
3. Evaluate any wall penetrations like windows, doors, pipes and wires to make sure they are properly flashed and sealed.
4. Check for cracks and movement in your foundation walls.

Before finishing your basement it is critical that the space remain dry, otherwise you are wasting your time and money.

Access:

The basement stair is often utilitarian in nature. Lacking grace or a sense of destination, it acts as a barrier, instead of a connection. Consider replacing the walls that hide your stair with new open railings and architectural details to make it special. Highlight this important connection and you will draw people down into the lower level of your home.

Finish:

If you want to reclaim your basement, treat it with the same creativity and attention to detail as any other space within your home. Select finishes on par with the main level living spaces, and continue architectural details commensurate with the vocabulary of the house. Details like this go along way towards turning your basement into lower level living space.

Creativity is also important. Undoubtedly there will be things like pipes, ducts and utilities that must be dealt with and concealed. Instead of impediments, consider them opportunities for design. Sculpt bumps in the wall to make an architectural niche; transform unsightly bulkheads into custom ceiling features. Clever details like this will make your space unique.

Light:

Large windows flood a space with light. Unfortunately, your basement sits partially if not mostly under ground, and the installation of large windows may be impractical. If your basement lacks natural daylight, don't skimp on lighting. Installing dimmer and scene selector controls will give you flexibility to manage light levels and set the desired mood for your lower living spaces.

In most homes, a finished lower level can increase the usable square footage of the home by more than 25%, and at a fraction of the cost for a new addition. This is but another way to reclaim underutilized space within your small home, adding space without adding space.