

Want some more living space? Can't build out or up—try down

Main floor family rooms have been the trend in many newer homes, but when there is no extra outdoor space for an addition, or you want to save money, your basement may be the answer to all your space problems.

And we're not talking about a return to the "rec" rooms of the past. With the variety of new materials and innovative building techniques available today, the sky's the limit for the lowest level of your home. Light-toned floorings and wall coverings and specialty lighting can turn even a dark, cramped space into a cozy, pleasant room. Whether it's a home theatre, a games room, a home office, an exercise gym or just a place to relax at the end of the day—with the right paint, furnishings, wall and floor coverings, you can create almost anything down under.

Converting a basement into a comfortable living space also has several advantages. It usually costs less to renovate a basement than to build an addition. Basements are also removed from the main household traffic areas, making them the perfect place to watch a movie, work from home, or give the kids their own space.

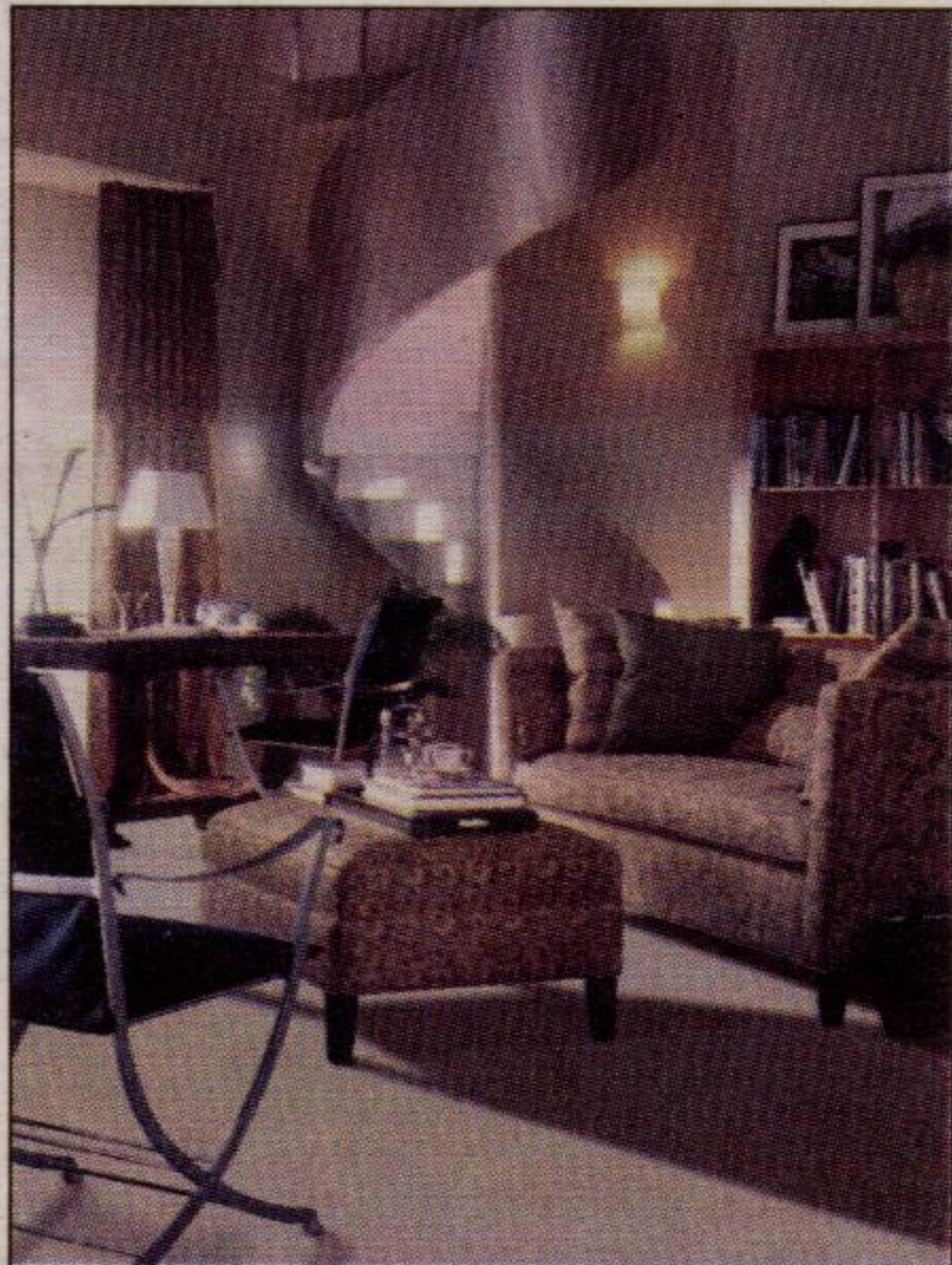
Before deciding what to include in a basement renovation, determine what your family will benefit from most in years to come. If you plan to knock down walls and install creature comforts such as a home spa, wine cellar, big screen television, pool or shuffleboard tables, be sure to measure the cost against the long-term use of these features. Also, take measurements. You want to be sure you can fit big-size items in your new space.

Most basements present two key problems: too much moisture and a lack of natural light. Any renovation plans should try to compensate for both.

Moisture

If the air in your basement feels damp occasionally, the solution may be as simple as adding a number of dehumidifiers to the new rooms. Most basement wetness/moisture is caused by inadequate drainage away from the house and foundation. Landscaping improvements around the exterior

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of your home can often resolve this problem. You may want to consult with a basement specialist before deciding what to do.

Light

Most basements, even ones with walkouts, lack natural light. A wide array of lighting fixtures and features are available today to help you solve that problem. Task lighting, dimmers, accent and other forms of lighting can be used to provide the brightness and atmosphere you

want for different rooms or activities.

Other problems

Turning a basement into a high-quality living space can present significant problems in some homes, especially older ones. A variety of posts, ducts and other structural challenges can turn a simple project into a complex renovation exercise. Some older homes, for example, have low basement ceilings. To get more headroom or meet building standards, the basement

floor may have to be lowered. This is an expensive and difficult undertaking. Most people will benefit from hiring a reputable basement renovation company to do this kind of major work.

Hiring a contractor

If you plan to hire a contractor to do the renovation, interview and get quotes from several before selecting one. A good contractor will be able to advise you on everything that's needed to create the kind of space you want for the amount of money you have in mind.

When you select a company, be sure to get a signed contract that outlines in detail, but concisely, the scope of the work and the payment schedule. Remember that in Ontario a hold-back fee of 10 per cent of the total cost may be withheld for up to 45 days from completion of the work to ensure that you are satisfied and all the "little details" have been worked out.

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