

Living in Atlanta

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Living down under

Less like a basement,
more like a home

By Tom Barry

Kimberly and Stephen Flanagan worked hard to match doors, windows, ceiling finish and trimwork in their basement to the rest of their house.

Architect Stephen Flanagan had a light and airy look in mind when he built out his unfinished basement several years ago. Flanagan also wanted the style to blend in seamlessly with the rest of the house.

"The challenge in renovating a basement is to create space that's flexible enough to allow for informal activity yet formalized enough to feel part of the main house," he said.

Mission accomplished. The 1,000-square-foot basement, which includes a bedroom/bath, study/television room, playroom and storage area, makes deft use of natural light and is of a piece with the upper two levels.

"I didn't want it to feel like a basement," Flanagan said. "Trouble is,

many renovated basements seem to have been designed as an afterthought or with a pet animal in mind rather than people."

Turning a dark and sometimes dank space into a stylish, comfortable living area is an increasingly popular move, an often inventive riff on the modern-day cocooning phenomenon.

"It's relatively inexpensive to make a basement habitable," said Eric Rothman, design director of HammerSmith Inc., a design/build firm in Decatur. "The foundation and roof, after all, are already there.

Homeowners, especially those with growing families, see it as a way to expand the house without spending so much money."



BYRON E. SMALL

Rothman, who has done basement makeovers ranging in cost from \$5,000 to several hundred thousand dollars, said outlays usually can be recouped at resale.

"The only exception is if you do something really weird," he said. "A mother-in-law suite, for instance, can add a lot of value to a house."

But experts caution that great care needs to be taken on a basement rehab, or the finished product can easily become a white elephant.

Flanagan, his wife, Kimberly, and their two young children live in a three-bedroom, 2,700-square-foot home near Briarcliff and Lavista roads. The Flanagans wanted an extra bedroom to serve as an in-law suite. With four sets of grandparents — only one set living in Atlanta — there was ample need.

"We wanted an in-law suite, but didn't want them to feel like they were relegated to the basement," said Flanagan, who focused on four components in the \$30,000 upgrade: light, ceilings, finishings and scale.

"Natural light is critical," he said. "The more light you have and the better you frame it, the less the space feels like a basement. Natural light should be treated as a precious resource."

Flanagan had windows on two sides of his basement, and he lowered them by one-and-one-half feet, to lessen the subterranean feel. The comfortable study/TV area features hardwood flooring and a barrel-vaulted ceiling that imparts a sense of spaciousness. French doors leading to the bedroom and transom lighting accentuate the effect.

Great pains were taken to match finishings and scale with the rest of the contemporary colonial home.

"We used the same doors, windows, ceiling finish and trimwork, to make the end product a cohesive whole," said Flanagan, who works out of the home with his one-person Studio One design firm. "You don't

want a massive disjuncture between downstairs and upstairs. You don't want a 30-foot-long room with seven-foot ceilings if you don't have that upstairs. And walls, ceilings and trim should be at the same level as elsewhere."

Rothman said, "Large rooms can make you feel like you're sitting in the Louvre. Space needs to have human scale, such as cozy little niches where you can sit and read."

Continuity need not extend to the flooring.

"Keep in mind what the room is being used for," Flanagan said. "A storage area or workshop doesn't need carpeting."

Moisture is the bugaboo of basement renovation.

A dry basement is a prize to kill for, especially in high-humidity Atlanta, where mold tends to put down roots and stay awhile. Usually problems stem from rainwater not being properly channeled away from the roof

(and therefore the foundation).

"The biggest mistake people make in redoing basements is not investigating moisture problems and then paying the consequences later," said Jerome Quinn, president of SawHorse Inc., an Atlanta renovation specialist. "It can be very expensive to fix a finished basement when water intrudes. Before you begin any work, you should be assured that you have a good, dry basement."

A basement, of course, can serve many purposes. Besides a guest bedroom, it can house an exercise area, recreation space and teen hangout. (The latter serves the dual purpose of putting distance between the parents and modern music).

"Home theaters are driving many basement projects these days," Quinn said. "The basement lends itself to a home theater. It's removed from the rest of the house, and the absence of windows actually helps."

Many factors must be considered in any makeover. A guest bedroom or mother-in-law suite, for example, can pose special problems.

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One expert recommends avoiding large rooms in favor of spaces that have human scale.

ing changes that affect load-bearing walls, you should consult an architect or engineer.”

Bucking the tide, Rothman believes it’s a poor idea to put a playroom in the basement.

“I’ve never seen a basement playroom that works effectively, unless the basement is closely connected to the back yard or there’s a nanny to go down there with the child,” he said. “That’s because kids like to be around their parents. To a young child, the basement is the scariest part of the house.”

No matter a basement’s use, lighting is a key.

“If you have a full daylight basement, it’s great, but that’s more the exception than the rule,” Rothman said. “The more lights, the better. People are drawn to light.”

Rothman recommends creating bright and darker spots, rather than lighting the space uniformly. “Avoid generic flu-

orescent lighting, which makes everything look cheap,” he said.

Nor should homeowners rely on just floor and desk lamps, in Flanagan’s view. “Light fixtures carry the burden of illuminating any basement, and you have to integrate major light sources

into the design. Fixtures that flood the space with indirect light or incorporate accent lighting can enliven an area.”

Acoustic tile ceilings — that old basement standby — are being used less and less.

“They’re ugly, stain easily, look cheap and tend to deaden rooms, in terms of both sound and light,” Rothman said. “We use a lot of suspended drywall ceilings, which are cleaner and easier to do lighting with. Another alternative is tin-paneled ceilings, which have an old-time look.”

Flanagan said, “You don’t have acoustic tile ceilings in the rest of your house. Why put them in your basement?”

Ceiling height is critical. Usually a minimum of eight feet below the ductwork is needed, although “we reroute as much ductwork as we can to get more headroom,” Rothman said. “The higher the ceiling, the more comfortable you feel.”

Creativity can work wonders. “If you don’t have high ceilings, you can create a sense of openness by varying the ceiling height, shape and form,” Flanagan said.

Homeowners often redo the basement but fail to renovate the approach to it. Big mistake. “If you still have to go through a little door and down some creaky stairs, the room won’t be used as much,” Rothman said. “Open the stairs and integrate the approach in an inviting way.”

Usually, the older the house, the costlier the basement project — something to keep in mind when looking to move.

“Most older homes were built with no thought that the basement would ever be used as living space,” Quinn said. “Older basements usually require a lot of modification, including the mechanical systems. In new ones, where the walls and doors will go has been predetermined.”

Flanagan rattles off all the advantages of his redone basement: room for guests, space for the kids to play, a TV area away from the upstairs.

“It’s made a dramatic difference in our lives,” he said. **LIA**

“People need to be aware of what the building code does and does not allow.”

“People think they can put a bedroom in the basement, but unless there’s a window and exterior exit, it won’t meet code,” Quinn said. “Usually a suite includes a small kitchen, which poses ventilation problems.”

Homeowners sometimes start building without first doing their homework.

“People need to be aware of what the building code does and does not allow,” Quinn said. “And if you’re mak-