

UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

Home

Go beyond the man cave. Fixing up the basement will add longevity to your home **By David Lasker**



This basement renovation by interior designer Dolores Pian incorporates custom cabinets for capacious storage.

IN EDWARD ALBEE'S absurdist play *The Sandbox*, Grandma appreciates how Mommy and Daddy took her in and "fixed a nice place for me under the stove." Nowadays, she rates a granny suite in the basement, but her real estate is getting crowded. Jobless kids graduating from university are squeezing in. Even separated husbands, kicked out of their homes and financially strapped as case conferences wind through the divorce courts, try to crash at their parents' house. And

what about telecommuters, those corporate-land refugees told to work at home except for weekly or monthly face time at HQ? Where else can they carve out space for a home office?

Reclaim existing space "With fixer-uppers going for a million dollars or more, spending \$100,000 to \$150,000 to reclaim your existing space is still cheaper than doing an addition, and basements are easier than attics."

So says interior designer Dolores Pian, principal at Spaces Custom Interiors. She was a regular expert

in the *Toronto Star's* Best Laid Plan section for more than 10 years, reviewing basement-sized spaces ranging from 350 to 1,500 square feet. She's been fascinated with the below-stairs region since growing up in the Italian neighbourhood of "Wood-a-bridge," as she calls it, northwest of Toronto, where multigenerational families live mainly in basements that function as a parallel universe to the main-floor living quarters. "The *nonna* [grandmother] would cook preserves, tomatoes and whatever else could get canned in the *cantina* [cellar] in the summer because it was cool and in the winter because cooking is messy," Pian recalls. "The upstairs was just for company."

Keep furniture light and airy

In a renovation in the Beach, Pian played up the Japanese heritage of her client by dividing the lounge-playroom and the guest room-office with shoji screen-like frosted-glass doors that close for privacy. They're mounted sliding barn door-style with clearance at the bottom. Continuing the theme, the seating group of tuxedo-style sofas and lounge chairs have a clean, tailored look, thanks to their straight, narrow backs and sides. Rising from skinny polished-metal legs, they evoke '50s Modernist Florence Knoll furniture in a *Mad Men* office suite. "Your eye travels underneath furniture on raised legs, keeping the look light and airy," Pian says. "That's contrary to what most people have in the basement, with skirts on the bottom and clunky curved shapes."

Economies of scale Pian worked a surprising amount of storage into the 700-square foot space gracefully. Exploiting economies of scale on the \$100,000 millwork budget, all the cabinets and tables are custom. Everything looks all of a piece, including the Murphy bed and a continuous L-shaped shelf along one corner deep enough to write on, with storage below

and cabinets above and desks for the three kids. Addressing Ikea-philies, she admonishes, "Many people buy a Billy bookcase and then a desk and a Billy bookcase and maybe an entertainment unit and another Billy bookcase. You get this wall of books."

BEST SUPPORTING ACTION

Ask a contractor

If your basement's low ceiling height has you crouching, budget \$40,000 to \$50,000 and allow at least three months for excavating and waterproofing a 700- to 800-square foot basement, says John Kiersnowski, president of Ascot Home Improvement. "Without underpinning, you can only go down a few inches usually," he says. The building code requires a sump pump and a backflow preventer to keep the basement from flooding if city sewers overflow (Toronto offers partial rebates for both).

How high? How much height do you

need? If you excavate, code calls for at least seven-and-a-half feet, but you'll want more if you opt for height-hogging track lighting. And be aware that the new under-floor infrastructure further reduces available height. After excavating, Kiersnowski covers the earth with a ¾-inch layer of drainage stones topped with concrete poured to a code-mandated depth of three inches.

How wide? Waterproofing your basement from the inside by digging a perimeter drainage trench and lining the foundation with, say, Delta membrane will keep your basement bone dry—at the cost of narrowing the floor plate by five inches along each wall.

Cold feet Kiersnowski adds two inches of Styrofoam insulation above the concrete floor and, above that, plastic pipes for hot-water radiant heating and then the flooring of your choice. Tender tootsies will feel pampered. ☑



Pian reduces clutter with modern solutions such as hiding the myriad of wires in the entertainment centre behind a sleek hinged flap in a false wall.



PHOTOGRAPHY, COLLEEN NICHOLSON

SPACE SAVER

Tips from two top interior designers to maximize your space by minimizing your stuff



▲ Consider **scale**. Mid-size furniture looks and fits better in smaller spaces and with smaller pieces, advises Karen Sealy (Karen Sealy Design). So think about that as well as space-saving pieces that do double-duty. And measure first — just because it fits in the room doesn't mean it'll fit down the stairs, in an elevator or even through the front door. *Savion Convertible Accent Chair Bed*, Cortesi Home, \$728, www.amazon.ca

◀ Choose **small appliances** and use the found space for storage because "you never see a half-empty closet," says Jane Lockhart (Jane Lockhart Interior Design). Consider a space-saving smaller refrigerator when downsizing or renovating. Miele, Bosch and LG offer slim models and visit retailers specializing in condo size. *LG 24" refrigerator*, \$930 (white, \$900), www.lg.ca —Tara Losinski

▲ For more downsizing tips, go to www.everythingzoomer.com/downsizing-tips.