



Let in the Light

A Townhouse Basement Transformation

BY BRUCE WENTWORTH, AIA

Capitol Hill homes have an abundance of underutilized basements. Although most homeowners want to take advantage of their lower level space, problems tend to arise: low ceilings, uneven floor slabs, moisture issues, poor ventilation, and lack of natural light. Fortunately, with an intelligent, practical, and cost-effective design, an underutilized and dark basement can become a useable and chic space.

This was the case for a recent townhouse basement remodeling project in Washington DC. A family with two young children wanted to turn their dark, gloomy basement into a multi-functional space with several defined areas. The homeowners specifically requested a TV/media area with lounge seating, a play area for their children, a home office space with a built-in desk and bookcase, a laundry closet for a stack washer/dryer, ample storage units, and a closet to conceal the mechanical equipment (boiler and hot water heater).

Despite the below ground space with only one window, the newly remodeled basement feels like a modern loft space that maintains the

charm of the historic townhouse above. The chic design was made possible in large part because of a simple solution for the typically low ceiling. The removal of the old drywall ceiling exposed the floor joists, cross bracing, and diagonal subfloor above. What some may see as the innards of a home became the basement's most exciting design feature: the exposed structure was spray painted white, enhancing the sense of space (providing 10" of vertical additional space between the joists). Abandoned wiring and piping were removed. Poorly located wiring and piping were relocated to minimize visual congestion. A new drywall bulkhead, running front to back in the basement, houses a steel beam, ductwork and piping. Even the basement's existing columns were transformed into functional and aesthetic design features. Columns were clad in drywall and fitted with horizontal bands of beech wood, fabricated in a pleasing pattern with narrow gaps to reveal the charcoal paint color of the drywall behind. Three columns repeat under the bulkhead, from front to back, and provide architectural interest that unifies the space. Repetition and pattern are supremely important to the new design: from large-scale porcelain floor tile (12" X 24") in a neutral gray -- perfect for below grade installations on a slab -- to the exposed floor joists and the custom woodwork cladding the columns. Doors were specified as natural stained birch and repeat the natural wood finish of the columns. The blond wood-

work and painted ceiling minimize maintenance.

Good lighting also helps makes the space feel like an above-ground family room. A west-facing window with window well, captures plenty of afternoon sunlight, (and the window jamb was flared at 45 degrees to enhance light penetration, as well as to give the impression of a larger window). The placement of standard light bulb sockets (inexpensive) at both sides of the bulkhead allows for interchangeable lighting depending on need, event or mood: silver-tipped bulbs look sophisticated or can be changed for warm yellow bulbs with a sepia tint to warm up the space for a family movie night. It also allows for the energy conscious homeowner to use whichever light bulb they prefer. Selective placement of small-scale track lights allows the homeowner to focus light where needed (such as the lounge seating).

What was once a dark shabby basement with an uneven floor slab is now a modern and functional space with a level floor (thanks to a liquid floor leveler poured over top of the uneven concrete floor slab). Thoughtful design minimizes maintenance and is a cost-effective basement remodel. The basement is perfect for a busy family on-the-go, a family who now enjoys spending free time in their basement.

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