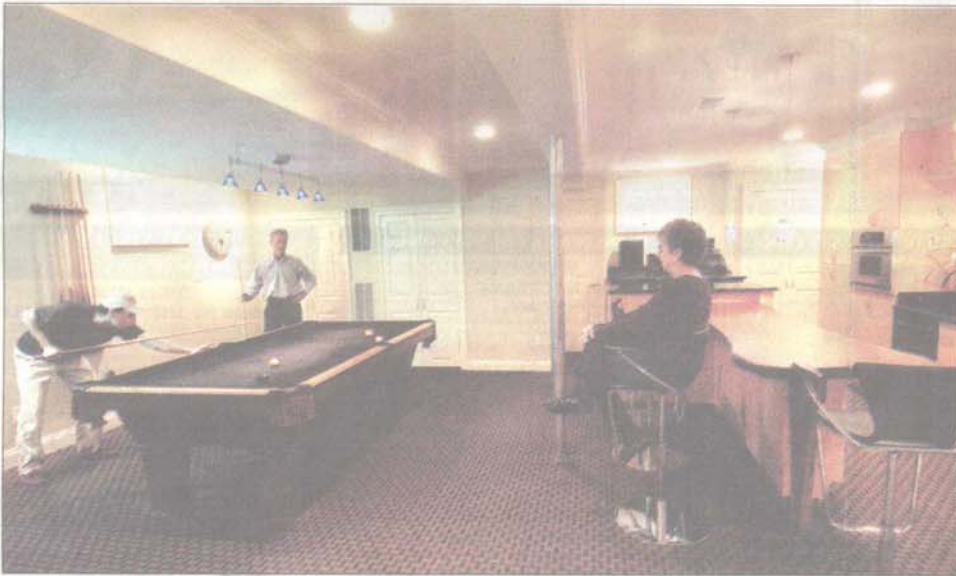


# Lower Levels Looking Up

*Basement Remodeling Offers a Less Costly Way to Add Space*



BY KATHERINE FREY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Mary Pomponi watches her husband, Phil, center, take on their son, Michael, 22, in a game of pool in their Bethesda home's new basement.



BY KATHERINE FREY—THE WASHINGTON POST

The Pomponi family updated their basement by opening up the stairs and updating the banister.

By DANIELA DEANE  
Washington Post Staff Writer

150P2

**B**are light bulbs hanging from low ceilings. Cheap indoor-outdoor carpet on the floor and dowdy wood paneling on the walls.

No wonder it used to be so scary to go down to the basement.

But not so much anymore. Basements are climbing out of the cellar and being transformed into well-lighted, high-ceilinged, often grand areas.

"Basements are bigger, better, taller, more expensive," said Jim Gibson, principal of Gibson Builders LLC, a D.C. custom-home builder. "Before, they were always considered secondary space. Now, people are making them a part of their house."

And they look like the rest of the house, too.

"The basement kitchenette will have granite countertops; the appliances will be the same as upstairs; there's high-level carpeting and ceramic tile in the bathroom instead of cheap carpeting and linoleum; the lighting is warm and recessed or with sconces instead of the old fluorescent; there's audio speakers in the ceiling for the surround sound system," said Craig



BY MICHAEL TEMCHINE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Kees made certain their new basement's bedroom is well lit and has plenty of space.

Durosco, partner in Sun Design Remodeling Specialists Inc. in Burke. At a time when moving to a bigger house can be prohibitively expensive for many people, remodelers say homeowners are realizing that finishing or updating a basement is a low-cost way to gain a big chunk of living space.

"A basement renovation is about half the cost of an addition," said Mark Richardson, president of Case Design/Remodeling Inc. in Bethesda. "The cost of building out is substantially more than doing a renovation of what you already have. Basements allow you to get more livable square footage without taking up any more of your land. It's a real benefit."

Because basements usually run the entire length and width of a house, the extra space can be considerable.

"In some of our models with basements, the basement is about 3,000 square feet," said Dee Minich of K. Hovnanian Homes. "That's a house in



BY MICHAEL TEMCHINE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Kathleen and Jim Kee watch television with their son, Brian, in their Springfield home's recently completed basement.

See BASEMENTS, F6, Col. 1 CC

# With Remodeling, Basements Move Out of Dark Ages



**After**  
In this Potomac basement, a tray ceiling was added to shed bright, even light on the pool table. The faux-painted bookcase to the right of the fireplace hides a door.



**After**  
Lots of recessed lighting can elegantly brighten a basement. The bookcases also have been lit in this room. Today's new basements also use more windows.



**Before**



**Before**

## BASEMENTS, From F1

himself.  
Just because it's less expensive to update the basement than to add a new room doesn't mean people are doing it on the cheap. Wet bars and home theaters are almost standard these days in upper-end houses. Gibson has also made basketball courts, mini-tennis courts, wine-tasting rooms, wine cellars, safe rooms, barber shops and hairdressing salons, massage salons, gift-wrap rooms, and even a parking garage for 14 cars.

"One client, a movie buff, added a \$150,000 home theater that seated 10 people in reclining theater seats.

"You don't even call them basements anymore," Gibson said. "Now, they're just lower levels."

Kathleen and Jim Kee, who recently remodeled their basement in Springfield, admit they were looking for "something elaborate" when they designed the project.

"We were thinking that if our two sons come back to live with us after college, they could stay down there and have their privacy and we could have our privacy upstairs," Kathleen Kee said.

So the couple made a guest bedroom with a "huge bathroom," a television area, a dining area, a kitchenette with built-in appliances, a breakfast bar for eating, a cedar closet, a storage area, built-in cabinets, and French doors that go out to a new patio. Columns in the basement echo columns used on the main level of the house. Countertops are granite; the kitchenette floor is Pergo. The project cost \$80,000.

"It's not like a basement basement," said Kee. "It's just another part of our house. When you think of basements, you think of spider webs and dark and dreary places and a musty smell. It doesn't have any of that."

Although people want elaborate basements, they don't buy them from builders, who usually include finishing work as an upgrade, not as part of a new house's base price.

Fewer than 10 percent of new-home buyers purchase a finished basement direct from the builder, said Gopal Ahluwalia, director of research for the National Association of Home Builders. Instead, they finish them with another contractor within two years of buying, he said. Often, he said, people are financially stretched when they buy a new house, and the basement is a purchase that can be delayed a bit.

That's what the Kees did. They bought a newly constructed house a year and a half before tackling the basement. "We were particular as to what we wanted. We didn't want a production basement," Kathleen Kee said.

Cory DeSpain, vice president of the Maryland/Virginia division for luxury homebuilder Toll Brothers Inc., said Toll has decided to offer only a basic finished basement, rather than something fancier. "We could never satisfy a high percent-

accommodate today's plush new ideas for lower level spaces.

Contractors say that the first thing a homeowner planning to finish or renovate a basement in an older house must do is ensure everything is dry. And even if it's dry now, do your best to determine whether it



Columns helped turned Kathleen and Jim Kee's basement into an apartment with a small kitchen, full bathroom, bedroom and living area.

age of buyers by offering an elaborate finished basement," he said. "This is an area where a lot of people customize."

DeSpain said most of Toll's local clients buy upgrades in preparation for completing the basement later.

"An awful lot of our customers pick higher ceilings for basements, ceilings of 9 or 10 feet," DeSpain said. "It's pretty clear they're planning to finish the space."

Owners of older houses are upgrading their basements, too, even though these spaces weren't built to

will stay dry.  
"Make sure that even during rainy times, it's not wet down there," said Chad Carpenter, owner of Potomac Builders in Alexandria. "It's especially important if you've just moved in and don't know the house well yet. Look for evidence of moisture like stains, mold, peeling paint. You wouldn't want to cover everything up and then discover you had a problem."

When undertaking a basement project, remodelers say they first try to get as much natural light down there as possible. They say they always encourage their clients to increase the amount of light by enlarging windows, putting in new ones or adding French doors to the outside, all touches that can add thousands of dollars to the price of remodeling.

"People tend to not want to use dark spaces," said Rick Mateus, a designer for Case Design/Remodeling. "If you create as much light as possible, you're sure it's going to become a place people want to go."

And the light can also be artificial. "In one basement in Potomac, we put lighting inside a glass block," Mateus said. "It back-lit the block, so it glows and accentuates the bar nicely." Mateus said that in the same basement, the company created a tray ceiling over the pool table—that is, a rectangular

area of the ceiling that is a bit higher than the rest of the ceiling. The tray, which was made the same size as the table, is lit inside, which gives an even, brighter light over the table.

As part of their recent basement

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PHOTOS BY KATHERINE FREY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Mary Pomponi loads her partially hidden washer at one end of the basement great room. French doors and a larger window bring light in at the other.



## A Home's Basement Can Be a Showplace

BASEMENTS, From F6

renovation, Mary and Phil Pomponi enlarged one small high basement window into a six-foot tall window. They replaced a bedroom window with two sets of French doors going out to a back patio. Then they added a glass door so the light coming in through the new windows would fill the room. They also upgraded all the regular lighting, putting in new track lights and sconces. Mary Pomponi says these upgrades make all the difference.

"It's not dark and dingy anymore," she said. "There's so much light down there now. It brightens up everything."

To make the basement feel as if it was part of the house, the Pomponis also opened up the stairwell leading downstairs. They installed a new staircase, too, with a curved wooden banister, the kind usually seen only upstairs.

Chad Carpenter of Potomac Builders said basements are generally easy projects. But there are some challenges. "If you have to move heating and air-conditioning systems, then it gets expensive and complicated," he said. "We try not to do that."

He said that in a lot of old houses, basement ceiling heights can't be changed, so compromises are necessary. Sometimes, though, low drop ceilings mask the true height of the room.

There are also national and state building codes that must be followed, in particular regulations that govern the exits from a basement. In Virginia, for example, a new state building code that took effect in Oc-

tober requires residents to add fire exits or extra-large windows to basements if they apply for a permit to finish or renovate those rooms.

Remodelers and real estate agents say that because homeowners care so much about basements these days, finishing that level can bring a good return on investment when it comes time to sell.

"People really need to focus on their basements," said Joshua Baker, president of Bowa Builders Inc. in McLean. "If they're not taking advantage of it, they certainly should be."

But some ways are better than others.

"You have to do the right stuff," said Richardson from Case Design/Remodeling. "First thing, don't think of it as a minimal second-class room in the house. Cheesy wood paneling doesn't go in a living room. So don't use it in the basement, either. Don't use cheap hollow-core doors, but rather paneled doors. Put in products and finishes that are consistent with the rest of the house."

He said, "The more you can not think of it as a basement, the better your decisions will be."