

Below-grade upgrade

Basement remodel makes for inviting and cost-effective addition to home

BY FRANK JOSSI

The Phinneys had a partially finished basement in their Highland Park home, but it "was a mess and not being used except by my 9-year-old who'd go down there and shoot hockey pucks," Megan Phinney said. This summer the family hired a contractor to turn their plywood-lined enclave into several inviting rooms with an adjoining bathroom.

"Now we have a television down there and a play station and a storage area and a bedroom that we're going to use as an exercise room," Megan said. "We figure it has added 700 square feet of living space to our house."

Megan and her husband Duane Phinney hired Peter Kessler of Landmark Contracting to do the work. When it comes to home additions, basement remodeling has several advantages, including a lower cost, said Kessler, whose firm specializes in that kind of project. "It's a simple decision to remodel a basement because it's existing space," he said, and much less expensive than raising a roof or adding dormers to the upper floor of a home.

"The majority of my clients are asking for rec rooms for the kids, who will then have it as a space of their own," said Dan Coffeen of Coffeen Construction. "There are other reasons for remodeling a basement, such as adding a bedroom or a bathroom, but it should be



Megan and Duane Phinney and son Sean, 9, have embraced the new living space in their remodeled basement. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER.

done because it's space you're going to use and not for added resale value."

In any basement remodeling project, the first consideration is water seepage. Wet basements can be dried through the installation of drain tiles and a sump pump, but drain tiling can be expensive. It requires digging a trench around the outside edge of the basement.

Before investing in drain tiles, Bob Brereton of Home Customizers recommends that homeowners make sure their gutters and landscaping move water away from the foundation.

Another approach to waterproofing involves the injection of bentonite clay around the exterior of a basement's walls from the foundation footing to the surface. Hydro-Clay, as it is called, is "basically a slurry mixture that looks like pancake batter and, when it solidifies, has the consistency of peanut butter," said John Howley of Great Lakes Waterproofing, which offers the service. The clay fills air pockets in the ground and any cracks in the basement

wall while adding a protective barrier that will absorb water before it has a chance to run into the basement. According to Howley, it costs about half as much as drain tiles.

The next consideration in basement remodeling is the network of ventilation, pipes and wiring running beneath the joists of the floor above. Many older homes have vents or pipes hanging six to 12 inches below the joists. Enclosing them can make for a very low ceiling. When that's the case, Kessler often recommends replacing them with new pipes and vents at the same height as the ceiling joists.

The Phinneys chose to go with nearly all new mechanicals, including an upgraded electrical box, new copper pipes that allow for zoned heating upstairs and a new water heater tucked into an unfinished corner of the basement. They also replaced the original support beam and the floor-to-ceiling posts that held it up with a new laminated load-bearing beam that doesn't require support posts. "It only took them a day to do that," Duane said.

"I was amazed."

Before putting up new drywall, contractors will remove old wall covering and clean the basement's cement wall of any lime or mold. They will then install a vapor barrier of fiberglass, foam or other insulating material against the cement surface. This is then covered by a second vapor barrier of polyethylene or aluminum.

The industry offers many options in basement flooring. For his clients who choose carpeting, Brereton recommends running a de-humidifier constantly. New "below grade" carpets designed for damp environments also work fine, Kessler said. Wood-like Pergo, laminates and wood flooring that "floats" above the cement floor are other alternatives.

"A lot of people want tile or wood floors in their basement," said Dan Tousignant of DTM Remodeling. "They want something more durable (than carpet)."

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The Phinneys chose Marmoleum for their basement, a linoleum flooring made of natural, non-toxic material. "It's hard to believe it's linoleum," Megan said. They also installed new glass block windows with a 3-by-12-inch casement for fresh air. "I love the new windows," Duane said. "They bring in a lot of natural light."

City codes generally require an egress window in the basement if any room is to be used as a bedroom. These can be built with wood, brick or metal walls, depending on a homeowner's tastes.

A new or remodeled three-quarter bath can add between \$5,000 and \$25,000 to a basement project, depending on the size and materials used, Brereton said. The job becomes

more expensive if the bathroom is situated in an area without easy access to the sewer line, Coffeen added.

As for heating, Brereton recommends baseboard radiators that work off a zoned system independent of the heating system upstairs. Other options include a space heater or a fan-assisted electric resistance heater. Since heat rises, a warm basement can lead to lower expenditures for heating the floors above.

Finishing a full basement can cost anywhere from \$50,000 to \$75,000, Kessler said. Coffeen's estimate ranged from \$20,000 to \$160,000. Brereton said a good rule of thumb is \$45 to \$75 a square foot.

But according to Sean Phinney, 9, the results are well worth the expense. Rolling around on the basement futon, he said, "I like it down here better than it was before."