

FROM DUNGEON TO LAIR

An architect crafts a basement lounge with exacting details

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Not far from where I grew up there is a small development of 1,100-square-foot ranch houses built in the late '40s and early '50s on an old potato farm. The appeal of this development is its adjacency to a park with a lake, shopping within walking distance, and a central location between New York City and Philadelphia with transportation to both cities only a few minutes away.

Twelve years ago, during my weekly Sunday open house visits, I came upon a ranch just like all the rest—until you went down the basement stairs. There, I found a classic 1960s rec room with knotty-pine walls and a checkerboard floor, complete with a wet bar that would seat a dozen. I thought to myself, What a great place to entertain—I have to get one! Less than a year later, I purchased one of those ranches and the dream began.

As an architect, I wanted to create my own Wow! living space in the basement, but there were various challenges to overcome. A clunky, dark stairwell, few windows, low ceilings and even lower ductwork, and ugly lolly support columns were some of the most obvious. Thinking back to the room I saw during my house search, I remembered how much I liked the warmth of the wood walls, the distinctive floor and the wet bar. I wanted the same thing, but with a contemporary style and clean detailing.

All good design starts with putting pencil to paper to work out the design and figure out how to eliminate or hide the deficiencies in a space. Here are the major items that I addressed to turn my basement into a lower-level masterpiece (if I do say so myself):

Pre Lounge

As part of the project, I had to revamp the mechanical side of the basement to make the living area possible. I built a workshop to house my tools and supplies, then reconfigured the laundry room, added a cedar closet with a wine cellar, and created a new bathroom space with a walk-in shower, vanity and an ejection pump to eliminate the step-up of the original toilet.

Ductwork

Reorganizing the ductwork to increase headroom in the circulation and occupied areas was key. This was done by slightly decreasing the depth and increasing the width of



Previous spread and opposite, top: With a ceiling height of 6'9" at the tallest, John Conroy chose to emphasize the womb-with-a-view qualities of his basement. Barely visible doors with Schlage lever handles lead to such necessities as a bath, mechanicals, workshop and laundry. The drawer pulls are from Häfele and the tile backing the as-yet-unfilled aquarium was ordered from Daltile, as were the slate flooring and the marble top on the storage unit by the sofa. The discontinued lounge chair and ottoman are from Bo Concepts, the Lind hide ottomans came from Room & Board and the sectional and built-in-seating cushions were custom fabricated by Mason-Art in NYC. Upcycled materials from Conroy's design office include Plexiglas used for the media storage door and glass for the coffee table's inlay and the bar shelves.

Opposite, bottom: The bar and niche area, showing the SunTouch radiant floor and slate tile ready for installation. The old stairs, duct configuration and furnace location were all revamped during renovation.





the ducts, while moving the main supply duct to along the exterior wall. My plan called for a 26' long, built-in credenza with integral bench along that wall. All other minor duct runs were repositioned between the ceiling joists; this part of the renovation was the only piece for which I brought in a contractor.

Natural & Artificial Light

I started with the obvious, and added three operable art-glass windows that span the width of the entertainment zone. To create the illusion of even more windows, I incorporated a mirrored display next to the bar that catches one's eye from the stairs, and a built-in, 240-gallon aquarium is located opposite the window wall.

And what basement renovation would be complete without a set of skylights—yes skylights! The beauty of living in a ranch is that the ceiling of a basement stairwell can still reach roof-access daylight via skylights. The new vaulted space at the stairs is what sets the whole tone for the project and removes any feeling of descending into a black hole.

For artificial lighting, I incorporated a series of low-volt-



age downlights in the main ceiling, a mirrored light cove along the credenza wall hidden behind the return air duct, and puck accent lights highlighting the bar.

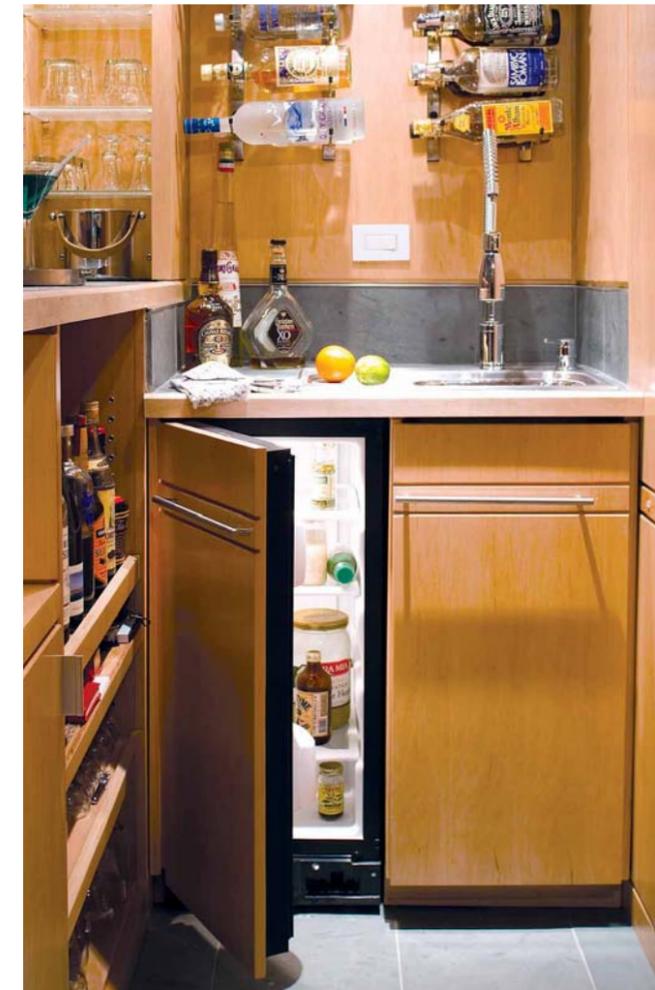
Structure

Everyone usually looks at those round four-inch steel support columns and says, "How do I hide or even get rid of these in my basement?" Well, I did just the opposite

and told myself I needed more of them. Using the load-bearing columns as an architectural element to create a series of architectural bays, I then added faux ones along the credenza wall to balance out the space. These false columns are simple 4" PCV pipe from a home improvement store. Both real and faux columns were finished with metallic paint to further accentuate them.

Natural Wood

My choice of materials was carefully considered. The knotty pine I saw at the open house wasn't the look I had in mind; however, I still wanted the warmth of wood. Keeping things as light and airy as possible, I chose maple veneer plywood, which I selected from a veneer company that sells wood sliced into 1/32" sheets (or thinner) from a single, sustainably harvested tree. The veneer was sent to a plywood manufacturer to apply to a 3/4" plywood core in a slip-match pattern with all the panels labeled in sequence.



A U-Line under-counter fridge and Room & Board stools at the angled bar top.

Opposite, top: This is the view one sees from the stairs: Major air ducts are now concealed by the two box beams that run the length of the room, while minor ducts are hidden above the corrugated metal ceiling panels. Much of the custom furniture has legs from hairpinlegs.com, and other items were MacGyvered—such as the Tolomeo desk lamps that now have aluminum tube extensions. Vintage Knoll MR chairs surround the triangular table and the carpet is from Masland.

Opposite, bottom: The new windows, prior to their decorative art glass, are in place in the media zone; studs, insulation and vapor barrier are in progress.

When the 4'x8' panels arrived, I carefully organized them before fabricating all of the custom panels, wood furniture and built-ins. I paid particular attention to the grain features, aligning all the panels as they wrap the room and furniture; this is called blueprint matching. The bird's-eye-maple wall above the credenza was designed as a feature element, with the panels configured in a Mondrian-like pattern and washed with light from the cove above. To break up the expanse of wood panels and add a sense of depth, frosted and mirrored glass panels were placed throughout the space.

Overhead

The ceiling is a perforated, corrugated-metal panel painted with a metallic paint to match the columns. It is simply held in place with stainless steel screws and decorative washers spaced evenly along the ceiling. This not only made for a dynamic ceiling, but a section can be taken down if access is needed and then easily reinstalled.

Special attention was paid to the placement of the downlights so they were always located in the same place within the corrugated pattern of the panel. To break up the expanse of metal, wood faux beams that align with the lolly

columns were secured magnetically. Magnets hold up most of the ceiling and all of the wood wall panels, except for the largest ones that use panel Z clips. These strong magnets are a three-piece element: a 3/4" diameter rare earth magnet, a 3/4" diameter puck screwed to the opposing surface, and a cup the magnet sits in screwed to the panel.

Underfoot

For the flooring, two materials were chosen: A natural green slate with a heat warming pad underneath defines the circulation zone and bar area and, in the main seating area, a bold striped carpet adds a pop of color and picks up on the stripes in the corrugated ceiling. The stairs are a transition between the main-level floor material and the lower level. The risers are slate, while the treads are white oak running in the same direction as the floor above. All of the stair components are held slightly away from the wall panels to give the illusion that the staircase is floating.

Furnishings

Most of the furniture was designed specifically for the

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space. The wood pieces are made out of the same slipped-matched maple-veneer plywood and were often inspired by furniture seen in Atomic Ranch. The sectional, complete with a pullout double bed, fits within the carpeted zone; my fabricator upholstered it and the bench cushions with textiles from Knoll and Sina Pearson.

Neighborhood Scale

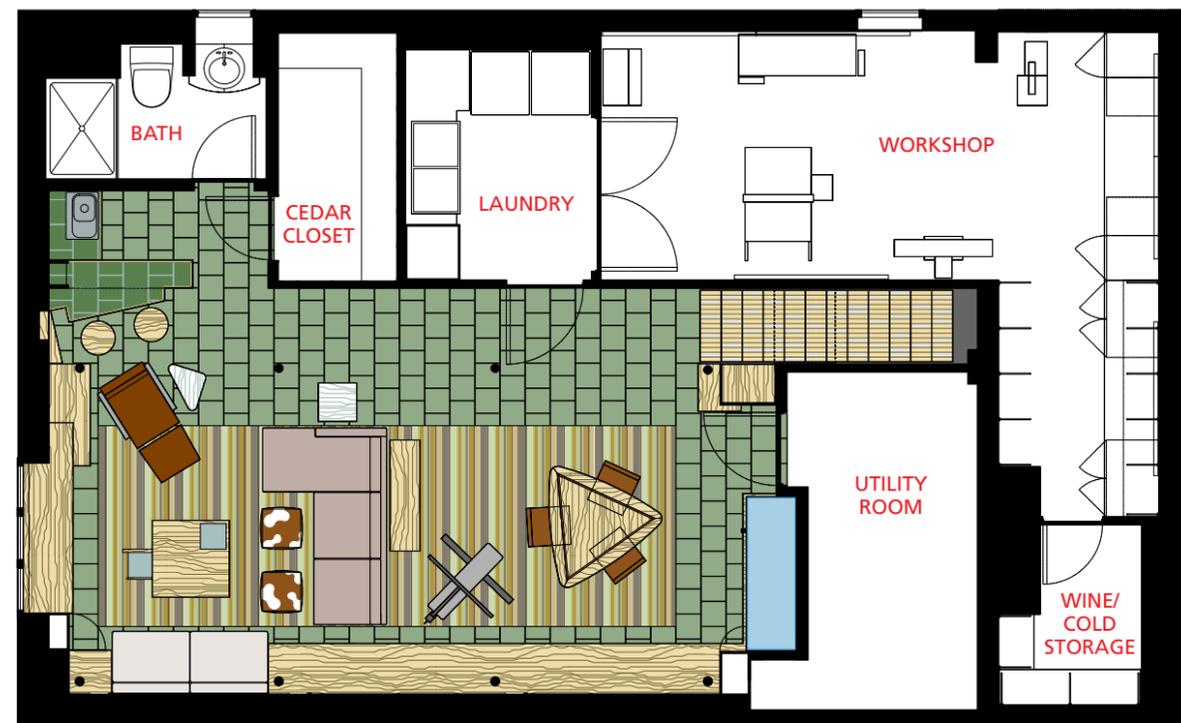
Ranch homes in my area still sell at a premium per square foot, better than any multistory residence. Seeing some of my neighbors rip off their roofs and put on second stories, I knew that was not for me. Luckily, not too many have gone that route, but those who did cannot recoup their investment in the current economy. I was almost able to double my living space without adding one square inch to my home.

Before completing the lower level, it was hard to entertain during the winter months since my home is relatively small. Now, with the added space, wet bar and home theatre, it seems my midcentury home has become the hot spot to hang. Friends and relatives who see it for the first time fall silent and just gaze before saying how nicely it turned out. I guess my 10 winters of working on the space really paid off. ✨

John Conroy is the founder of Princeton Design Collaborative in Lawrence, N.J., which offers architecture, interior, landscape, graphic and web design services. Jeff Tryon is the art director at PDC; check out their site at 360pdc.com.

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One would never guess that the modest ranch John Conroy bought in 2000 houses a bespoke entertainment zone in the basement.



John Conroy

