



Living it up on the lower level

Steps set the tone. To transition from the upper to the lower level, stair treads were made from the same white-oak flooring used on the first floor, and risers were made from the slate used on the lower level. Conroy installed a series of skylights in the roof above the stairwell to introduce natural light to the lower level.

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Our call for entries for the “Before & After: Basements” contest asked visitors to FineHomebuilding.com to post photos of “blah to beautiful” basement transformations. For its contemporary design, clean lines, choice of materials, and anything-but-basement-like appearance, this 550-sq.-ft. lower-level great room was declared our winner. It took architect John T. Conroy 10 years of on-again, off-again work to design, fabricate, and install all the components he used to banish the basement blues from this space. Now when they head to this sleek lower level to work, relax, or entertain, Conroy and company can live it up even though they’ve traveled one flight down.

Design, millwork, and construction: John T. Conroy, Princeton Design Collaborative, Princeton, N.J.

Photographs: Jeffrey Tryon, courtesy of Princeton Design Collaborative



Room to unwind. Conroy designed the lower-level layout and fabricated and installed all the maple-veneer panels, many of which are secured with a magnet detail he devised. The credenza wall's panels, made from bookmatched bird's-eye maple, create a focal point. The other wall and the ceiling panels are slip-matched plain sliced maple. Perforated corrugated metal sheets were installed on the ceiling to aid with the room's acoustics. Conroy incorporated the bands of maple to add interest to the ceiling and to divide the space visually. To heighten the perception of length, he added horizontal banding to the wall panels. Daltile slate flooring installed over a heat mat complements the maple and the metal.



Home-time happy hour. Tucked into a corner, this wet bar has plenty of storage for glasses and bottles within easy reach of the bartender. The undersink cabinet and refrigerator doors are faced with maple-veneer panels to continue the sleek, clean look of the space. The bar top is angled to guide the eye out of the corner and toward the main sitting area. Set into the wall opposite the stairway, a display niche is another design trick used to draw the eye into the room. With its mirrored back, the niche gives the illusion of another window, helping to lessen the feeling of being below ground level.



Sit for a spell. Installed above the entertainment wall, stained-glass windows by Andersen bring daylight into the space while screening the at-grade outdoor view. This lessens the impression of being in a room that is below grade. The entertainment zone houses a 60-in. flat-screen television in its own niche, audiovisual components located behind a Plexiglas door, and storage for DVDs and CDs. The home's computer server and additional storage are located behind a large L-shaped door. Conroy's custom coffee table and built-in bench enhance the modern but cozy feel of this portion of the room.