

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Ask a designer: Rethinking the basement for spring

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This undated photo provided by Jenny Kirschner shows a basement designed by the New York-based interior designer. Details like crown molding and built-in shelving give this basement home office a glamorous feel fit for any room of the house. (Ryan Dausch / AP)

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Basements can be cold and dark, and often get much less decorating attention than the rest of the house. But you can gain new, useful and stylish living space by upgrading that subterranean space.

Step one is addressing any risk of flooding or water leakage. Bring in a professional to assess the risk and recommend safety measures. If the air in your basement is damp, add a dehumidifier to dry it out. After that, the options for renovating and redecorating a basement are endless.

We've asked three interior designers – New York-based Jenny Kirschner, and Los Angeles-based Sayre Ziskin and Theodore Leaf – for advice on transforming basements into well-loved rooms, while preserving their role as a practical storage space.

## Choose a purpose

Growing up in the Midwest, Leaf saw his grandmother and mother use their basements as creative spaces for sewing or scrapbooking. He encourages homeowners around the country to take the same approach: Choose a particular purpose for your basement, or perhaps two purposes if the space is large enough.

Ziskin agrees: “Make a decision as to what you’d actually go down there for,” she says, and be realistic. “If you make it into a game room, how likely are you to actually go down there?”

For some, it works best as a home office. “I’m one of the few people in LA who does have a basement,” Leaf says. “It’s a walk-out basement, and it’s where I edit all my videos. The lack of light is actually great because I can see my screen properly.”

Basements with little natural light can become gorgeous media rooms, he says, and can solve the problem of having a living room dominated by a large TV.

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And don’t forget embracing the original purpose of a cellar: Use it as a cool spot for fermenting healthy foods like kombucha.

## Warm it up

Many homeowners avoid their basement because it’s cold, Ziskin says. If so, tackle that problem first.

Ziskin recently decorated a basement with low-pile carpeting in a soft shade of gray, and then finished the edges with molding. It gave the room warmth while adding the sort of finished look you normally find upstairs. For added coziness, you can layer area rugs on top of low-pile carpeting. Carpets and rugs will also improve acoustics. (If decorating with carpet, of course, make sure any water leak problems have been solved.)

Another warming trick: Ditch cold, unflattering, fluorescent lights in favor of warm bulbs, and add more light as needed.

“It’s important to have at least one overhead light,” Ziskin says, and you’ll want that to be a flush-mount that doesn’t drop lower than 6 inches below the ceiling, since basement ceilings are often lower than ceilings upstairs. Then fill in with wall sconces, floor lamps or table lamps.

Leaf agrees: You want “lighting coming from different angles, so put a lamp in there,” he says, “and up-lights in the corner.”

Lighting is important enough in a basement that Kirschner suggests working with a professional.

It can help to add a dimmer so you have brighter light for working or games, and soft light for socializing or screen time.

Lastly, include upholstered furniture with soft, warm textures (“Stay away from leathers and vinyls that feel cold and slippery,” says Ziskin), and finish the space with a big basket of cozy blankets.



## Go light and bright

Basements are great places to take design risks, so have fun.

“Why shouldn’t the floor be teal or bright orange? Make it happy,” says Leaf. “Put up that one wallpaper swatch you always loved.”

Even in a basement storage room or laundry room, he says, “paint it a color you don’t hate.”

Also consider the positive impact of light, airy colors, says Ziskin. She prefers “a very light off-white or a very soft light gray, like a very light cloud color.”

## Invest in quality

All three designers suggest decorating basements with the same level of quality and beauty you choose for other rooms. Details like crown molding and built-in shelves give basement rooms the feel of a “real” room.

Kirschner and Ziskin have used Ikea’s built-in cabinets to create stylish basement spaces without huge expense. Line one wall with floor-to-ceiling wardrobe cabinets in the same solid color for a neat, cohesive area where items can be stored out of view.

For open storage, choose strong shelving units with a bottom shelf that’s 4 to 6 off the floor, just in case of any flooding, says Leaf.

And choose good containers to put on those open shelves. “If you have a mishmash of plastic bins, donate them and get ones that match,” Leaf says. “If it’s good-looking, you’re more likely to keep it organized.”

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