



Designer Lowdown on Basement Decor

By Melissa Rayworth, The Associated Press
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It's easy to find advice on decorating nearly every inch of your home. Kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, baths — even mudrooms and closets get attention. But the lowly basement gets short shrift.

These subterranean spaces present a host of decorating challenges, from low ceilings and limited natural light to never-ending battles with dampness and even flooding.

Yet basements can be untapped treasures.

Kathryn Bechen, author of the new "Small Space Organizing" (Revell Books), first tackled basement decorating while living in a tiny basement apartment. Years later, she preaches the same decorating techniques that helped make her underground rental into a cozy home: Decide exactly how you'll use your basement, and then either embrace its dark coziness or use colour, texture and the right furnishings to bring the illusion of bright, open space.

Bechen says it's worth the effort, especially for people with small homes, to convert a previously ignored basement into a family gathering spot, workspace or media room.

Here she and interior designers Brian Patrick Flynn, founder of decordemon.com, and Kyle Schuneman, an expert on decorating small spaces, offer advice on making basements beautiful.

LIGHTEN UP OR EMBRACE THE DARK

"Since there's usually a major lack of natural light in basements," Flynn says, "inject light by using muted colour and tons of white. What I often do is stick with muted greys on the walls, then use ultra-white on ceilings to help bounce light throughout the space. But to make it more punchy, I toss in a super-saturated accent colour such as fire-engine red, grassy green or orange."

White furniture may seem like a recipe for disaster, but furniture upholstered in white can work in a basement as long as you choose durable, washable fabrics.

Using plenty of floor and table lamps will also help, and Bechen says the old advice about mirrors shouldn't be ignored: Strategically placing a mirror opposite even a tiny basement window will help maximize light.

The opposite approach also works: Decorate with sleek, low-slung furniture in dark colours to create a sophisticated lounge effect, using the cozy intimacy of the basement to your advantage, says Schuneman.

He says this sexy lounge look isn't hard to accomplish, and makes a low ceiling less of a detriment. Have fun gathering ideas by visiting clubs and restaurants that feature this look.

GO BOLD

All three designers believe basements are perfect spots for bold decorating. Experiment with colours you don't normally use or indulge in theme decorating that might feel like overkill if you did it throughout your house.

Basements are perfect "for having a retro moment," Schuneman says, since many of them feature vintage wood paneling and decorative touches that have been in place for decades. You're not creating a stage set, he says. But if there are vintage pieces already in your basement, why not amplify that look rather than removing it?

Another option: "Go for the feel of a little seaside cottage," Bechen says. Use shades of pale blue, sand and white in linen, light cottons and berbers. Go all out with seashells and decorative pieces with ocean or island motifs. Beach cottage style subconsciously reminds you of open spaces and sunshine, she says, transforming the feel of your basement.

And if your basement will be used as a media room, go with a movie theme by framing vintage movie posters bringing in some Hollywood style, she says.

CHANGE THE CEILING

"Many basements have drop-down ceilings, which are definitely practical since it makes for easy access to plumbing and electrical," Flynn says. But inexpensive drop-down tiles are often unattractive and look cheap.

"I usually recommend high-end ceiling tiles with architectural detail. They're double or triple the price of basic drop ceiling tiles, but they give a much more sophisticated look. Plus, you can install them yourself."

Another option, he says, is installing stamped metal tiles: "They have the look of an old school Victorian ceiling, but all you need to put them up is a pair of safety gloves."

If there is harsh overhead lighting, consider swapping out old fixtures (especially fluorescent ones) with something that radiates warmer, more flattering light. Or, Bechen says, at least swap out bluish fluorescent lights for ones with a pink hue.

WARM UP THE FLOOR

First, choose materials that can handle moisture.

Even basements that don't normally flood can still have a buildup of moisture. Schuneman recommends laminate flooring or vinyl floor tiles for durability and for style: Thanks to improved technology, he says, "there's some really rad stuff out there."

Bechen recommends cork flooring, which is durable, warm and soft underfoot. And Flynn recommends FLOR carpet tiles. "You can install them yourself," he says, "plus they can come up if the floor gets wet, then you can take them outside and dry them in the sun."

To keep new flooring in good shape, consider using a dehumidifier. And a freestanding fireplace can help banish both cold and moisture, assuming you have the proper ventilation to use one safely.

ORGANIC ELEMENTS

"Basements don't have to be all concrete and plastic," Flynn says. "I like to incorporate organic elements wherever possible, such as sisal on a stairwell. The rough texture is great for traction, and it creates more of an inviting, residential feeling upon entry to a basement."

Along with using organic materials, Bechen suggests bringing in plants — real or fake. If you have a small window, she suggests decorating near it with plants that thrive in very low light. High-end silk plants also can bring a sense of outdoors and open spaces, she says.

EMBRACE THE SILENCE

Tucked away from the main traffic areas of the house, a basement can be the perfect place for independent work or play.

"Some of the most practical home offices I've ever designed are in basements," Flynn says. "The office is separated from the noisiest parts of the house and it keeps private documents stored safely away from the hustle and bustle."

To bring some creative kick to his own basement workspace, Flynn put down pine flooring and then "painted it an orange and white zigzag pattern, and lightened up dark brick walls with white paint. It feels kind of like a loft that just happens to be underground."

Basements have also traditionally been great play spaces for children because they can cut loose without disturbing anyone. If the room will be used mainly by kids, Bechen suggests avoiding very child-centric décor, which they'll soon outgrow. You can use bold colours and perhaps hang your kids' framed artwork on the walls. But anything too preschool-focused will soon feel outdated.

Whatever the purpose of your newly redecorated underground space, Bechen says the more finished and detailed you make your basement décor, the more it will feel like the rest of your house.