

Spiffing up your basement

By Alan Zibel
Associated Press

When it comes to remodeling your basement, the era of 1970s-style wood paneling and thick shag carpeting is over.

These days, basement designers want to make your cellar look as polished as the rest of the house. The only limits are your budget and the amount of space downstairs.

Trendy transformations include home theaters, workout rooms, walk-in closets, bars, pool rooms, wine cellars and guest suites.

But before you spend tens of thousands of dollars on fixing up your basement, think twice about what you're actually likely to use, says David Schrock, a Chicago-area basement remodeling expert who sells a detailed guide of tips for basement remodeling projects on his Web site, www.basementideas.com

For example, while almost everybody wants a downstairs bathroom these days, people often overestimate how much they are going to use it. "If you're not going to use the shower, maybe you don't want to dump the money into it," he said.

And just like any other major home improvement project, there are plenty of pitfalls to avoid, like water damage from flooding and unscrupulous contractors.

Kyle Davis, owner of The Southern Basement Co. in Cartersville, Ga., advises consumers to get at least three bids from contractors that primarily focus on basements.

Davis says homeowners should insist on several references and photos of the contractor's previous jobs. And if you can, he says, tour the contractor's previous work in person.

Many contractors were put out of work because builders halted construction projects as the housing market went into a severe downturn. That means they are desperate for jobs and may low-ball estimates. While that sounds good at first, it could mean cutting important corners.

"You need to be very leery that they know what they're doing," Davis said.

Preventing flooding and water damage in the basement should be a primary concern. One popular option: a sump pump system with a battery-operated backup that can pump out water even if there's a power failure.

Consumers should install such a system at before they kick off an expensive remodeling project, said Eric Tullio, national operations director at Mid-Atlantic Waterproofing in Laurel, Md.

He warned, "If you have a water problem after the fact you're going to have to tear it all apart."

Schrock, the Chicago basement specialist who has a over a decade of experience, advises



These undated photos provided by The Southern Basement Co. showed a basement before and after it was redesigned. These days, basement designers want to make your cellar look as polished as the rest of the house. The only limits are your budget and the amount of space downstairs.

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homeowners to get rid of 1970s-style drop ceilings in favor of drywall. Doing so can actually make the room feel more spacious, even if it only makes the ceiling an inch or two higher.

He also advises installing recessed lighting — one for every six-foot by six-foot space — to provide lots of light and reduce the dark basement atmosphere.

Schrock has remodeled basements throughout the Chicago area, with common features including bars, built-in cabinetry and workout rooms. One of his favorite projects was done for a couple who had recently moved out to the suburbs. To create an industrial, loft-style feel, Schrock left the ceiling beams exposed and had them painted black. The basement's walls were painted red and yellow, and Schrock installed a dark wood bar.

Scott Stevens, owner of Denver-based American Basement Co., has remodeled 600 basements with features as unusual as a golf simulator and a lap pool.

For \$600, Stevens will produce a three-dimensional computer model of how your basement will look after it's finished — including such details as the location of the pool table, bar and flat-screen TV — and will send you the blueprints. "You tell me the measurements and I'm drawing the plan right in front of your eyes," Stevens said.

David Widlund, who runs his own mortgage company out of his house in Castle Rock, Colo. hired Stevens' company for a \$40,000 basement project more than two years ago.

One particularly good addition, Widlund said, was a large egress window — a window large enough for a person to crawl out in an emergency. It allows a good amount of natural light to pour in, brightening up the space.

His basement now features a bedroom, a bathroom and a home theater with a 100-inch projection screen, and he admitted, "We hang out there a little too often."