

FROM DUNGEON TO LAIR

An architect crafts a basement lounge with exacting details

text John Conroy

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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.