



ROOM TO *Unwind*

From retooled great rooms to remodeled basements, homeowners crave flexible spaces for relaxing with family and friends.



Photos courtesy of Bradford & Kent

It's been said that the family that plays together stays together. If that's the case, great rooms and recreation rooms might be among the most important in the house. Having space where the family can kick back and relax, as well as welcome friends and extended family members, remains a top consideration for those considering home remodeling.

"In the current economic climate, people have decided to stay put and bring their home up to modern standards, and rooms centered around family are most popular," says Marty Meadow, senior vice president for Airoom and manager of the firm's Naperville showroom.

"It's all about making the house more comfortable," says Maureen Buckley-Rogers, general manager of Walter E. Smithe's Naperville store. "Homeowners are still investing in rooms like the kitchen and great room. It is really the hub or epicenter of family life, and they are willing to put their money there."

SIZED RIGHT

Tom Cherrington, owner of Cherrington Builders in Wheaton, says the majority of additions continue to be kitchen, bath, family room and sunroom, usually situated at the back of the house. "People are looking for larger, brighter spaces with more windows and better lighting," he says.

However, many remodelers report that bigger isn't necessarily better. Cavernous great rooms are falling from favor as homeowners seek spaces that are more intimate and efficient. "People want rooms that are still spacious enough to accommodate everyone, but in lieu of volume, we are seeing more requests for detail, from unique windows to beamed ceilings," says Jim Goddard, an

architectural designer for Downers Grove-based custom builder Bradford & Kent.

And more folks are interested in retooling the space they have — such as changing the layout of the kitchen, moving a patio door, adding windows by the fireplace, relocating an entry, building a fireplace, etc. "Three years ago, there was more focus on luxury, lavish features, a sense of wanting to keep up with the Joneses. Now people are planning projects around necessity and comfort," says Troy Pavelka, design manager for Hinsdale-based Normandy Builders.

Toward that end, builders are helping homeowners maximize the function of their homes, sometimes borrowing square footage from underutilized rooms. For example, a recent Bradford & Kent project entailed creating a 30- by 21-foot family room that incorporated a television viewing area, pool table, stone fireplace and full bar (see photos at left and above). After tearing down some walls and eliminating the home's seldom-used living room, they needed to add only six more feet to the room's length.

GREAT ROOMS

As homeowners place more value on usefulness, multi-story great rooms have fallen out of vogue. "Two-story great rooms can be noisy and are not as cozy," says Andy LaMantia of LaMantia Design & Construction Company, Inc. in Brookfield. He says



In many family rooms, TVs and home theaters take center stage, with plenty of built-ins for ample storage and display space.



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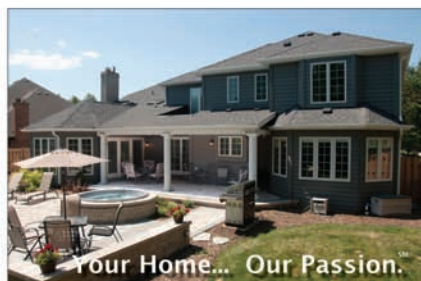
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clients are more likely to choose coffered or cathedral ceilings and add interest with arched windows. Another trend he's observed is setting the family room apart from the kitchen area with archways and columns that offer a visual break without closing off the space.

Airoom's Meadow confirms the increased interest in detailing, saying his company's clients frequently request coffered or tray ceilings, lighted soffits and arched or transom windows.

Windows and doors figure prominently in the great room. "People still like a lot of light and access to the yard and the outdoors," says Goddard, who recommends clients consider how their indoor and outdoor living spaces will mesh when planning an addition.

Home theaters have taken center stage in these rooms, with some homeowners opting for both an "everyday" wall-mounted television, as well as a drop-down screen and projection system for viewing movies or special events.



Architectural details like coffered ceilings help add visual interest to a great room or rec room.

Photo courtesy of Airoom

Following this trend are requests for more built-in storage for movies, games or other media.

Because of the family room's multiple

functions, there can be several focal points. In a room with two-story windows, for example, there's the view, plus an entertainment center and, perhaps, a fireplace. "Placement of furniture



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becomes very important in how you enjoy those three aspects of the room,” says Buckley-Rogers, noting that mounting the TV over the fireplace or using flexible pieces, like swiveling chairs, can help make this work.

SPACE DOWN UNDER

One of the ways to maximize existing space is to remodel or finish the basement. After all, that square footage is already there. “People almost always take advantage of the basement — it’s really another whole third of the house,” says Meadow.

But forget the drop-in ceiling tiles and paneling of years past. “The goal is to have it look like the rest of the house, with everything on par to the finish level of the upstairs,” says Goddard, adding that many homeowners choose to open up the stairwell and add a new railing to ease the transition between the basement and main floor and eliminate the feeling of being headed underground.

In fact, many prefer referring to such projects as a “lower level addition” rather than as a basement remodel. Homeowners often tailor the basement space to their interests, and newer homes often have basement ceilings as high as 10 feet, which opens up new options. Meadow says he’s had clients request extra amenities like wall niches for an art collection and a room just for video gaming. One high-end client even added a pool, as well as a gated wine cellar.

IN THE ZONE

Many of today’s family rooms include “zones” for the different activities that take place there. The zone-style design is especially important in a basement because it helps pack a large space with function and offers flexibility. “While they might use it for entertaining big groups, the space needs to be able to transform so you can enjoy it even with two people, say watching a movie on a Friday night,” says Pavelka.

As in the great room, the biggest trend in terms of the basement is the creation of a media hub, whether that’s a separate theater room or a large television and audio/visual closet for a taste of the theater experience.

Bars, frequently with mini kitchens, also round out the entertainment zone. While games and entertainment play a big role in the basement, some homeowners want to carve out room to practice favorite hobbies or focus on fitness. Bathrooms and exercise rooms are other common requests.

Bob Hajdich, president of Imagine Development, Inc. in Bloomingdale, has also found his clients like to pack a lot of function into the basement. One of his recent projects incorporated a wide variety of amenities, including a wet bar, a large movie screen with an overhead HD projection system, an arts and crafts area with storage cubbies and display, a game nook, an exercise room, a full bath with shower and a utility room. The area under the stairs was left open and finished to accommodate a twin-size mattress for an overnight guest. The result was a basement with “something for everyone in the family,” says Hajdich.

Marsha Jones, owner of Marsha Jones Interior Design, Ltd. in Wheaton, says the basement zones should be able to transition to fit the family at different stages and for different activities. For example, a basement craft room/playroom space might be converted into a gift wrapping station or scrapbooking center as the kids grow older.

STYLE MATTERS

Though good lighting is key to enjoying a rec room, it is even more important in the basement. While walk-out or look-out basements include above-grade windows and receive more natural light, traditional basements need a lighting plan that includes both overhead lights (often recessed), as well as ambient lighting in the form of floor and table lamps.

When it comes to furnishings, comfort is key. Transitional pieces with cleaner lines

are currently in favor. Though the terminology might sound like something out of the 1970s, Buckley-Rogers says "pit groups" are coming back in, especially for basements. These modular furniture pieces provide seating for a large group and can be arranged in different configurations to suit the space. Storage ottomans are replacing coffee tables because they offer flexibility and comfort.

Another popular item for both the basement and great room is a game table, whether it's a small café table where two could play cards or something larger that would work for a group playing a board game.

As for materials, Jones says that people are looking for durable goods that are "children and animal proof." Some are even choosing indoor/outdoor fabrics, which now come in textures like chenille, because they are stain and fade resistant. Leathers are still very popular, too, as are furniture pieces with distressed finishes.

In terms of palette, neutrals reign. "People either go for the classic neutral palette, adding interest with textures rather than pattern, or they really have fun with color, mixing eclectic styles, traditional with retro," says Jones.

Because it is on a separate level, some folks like to use basement space to pay homage to a favorite hobby, sports team or vacation destination. "The lower level can have a whole other flavor — you can really have fun with it," says Jones, who had one client who was crazy about the Caribbean and did the entire basement in that motif, including a bar made to look like a grass hut and a wall mural depicting a beach scene.

Whether a family room addition or a basement remodel, most in the industry agree that it's a great time to consider these projects because lower costs for labor and materials and favorable interest rates mean you get more bang for your buck. Observes Cherrington, "It's a good time to invest money in your home to get it the way you want it." ■



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