

YOU CAN DIG IT

When building up or out is out of the question, 'get down' with a basement remodel.

BY RAMONA D'VIOLA

Congratulations. You got your piece of the rock, albeit a tiny home on a postage stamp-sized lot — and way before the kids. You love the neighborhood, the schools, and your community, but your “cozy” home has become a tight fit, and the city says “no” to your plans to build up or out. You’re not the first to face this conundrum.

It might be time to ‘get down.’ Whether you’re in need of an office, a studio space for a budding musician (basements are great sound barriers), another bedroom (or two), basement remodels are an increasingly popular option for East Bay homeowners, and they rank at the top of home remodel projects for return on investment while adding valuable square footage to your home. Moreover, with the recent loosening of restrictions

on Accessory Dwelling Units in Berkeley, Oakland, and Alameda, basement remodels are helping create much-needed rental and housing stock throughout the Bay Area.

Give It a Lift or Go Down Under?

Whether you choose to lift your home or excavate the subterranean space beneath depends on its architectural style, where it’s located — on level ground or slope — and, of course, whether or not the city is ‘down’ with what you’re up to.

“Most coastal East Bay cities prefer excavation projects over lifting,” said Kevin Mond of Berkeley’s HDR Remodeling. “Primarily to maintain the architectural language of the neighborhood and preserve existing views.

“An excavation requires digging beneath the



home to create the space for a basement remodel, while leaving the front door in its original location,” said Mond. “Lifting a home to add a basement also requires some digging; however, we elevate the entire structure to build an additional story beneath. In this scenario, the original front door location might now exist on a second-floor landing.”

Permission to Build.

For some homeowners, excavation is the only solution to expanding a home’s living space, while not affecting their lot coverage or property lines. However, before you ever break ground on a basement addition, you’ll need to understand the types of permits required and why.

An **accessory structure** permit is the easiest of the three to obtain. This permit allows a homeowner to remodel or add a basement for storage, as an office, or studio space and allows for a half bath, e.g. toilet and sink but no shower. There are also restrictions on heating options.

An **accessory dwelling unit**, or ADU, permit is intended for basement remodels that create a separate living space, e.g. a standalone apartment with its own entrance, kitchen, and bathroom facilities. Berkeley and Oakland have recently streamlined the ADU permitting process to encourage and accelerate the creation of ADUs in their cities. Lastly, the most difficult building permit to obtain is the home **addition** permit. What differentiates a home addition permit from an ADU is the former adds square footage to the *existing* living space of a home. That is, the basement remodel is part of the home, accessible via a staircase that connects the two living spaces — not through a separate entrance.

Dragons, Yes. Dungeons, No.

Just because you’re going below doesn’t mean your basement remodel should feel like a dungeon.

“Many craftsman-style homes, or those built on slopes, already have a crawl space,” said Mond. “This existing space above the ground allows us to utilize and maximize natural light. We place bathrooms or storage areas in locations where natural light isn’t necessary and minimize the number of walls throughout the new space.

“Lastly, we employ ambience-enhancing technologies like heated floors and high-end finishes to create comfortable and inviting spaces that don’t feel like dungeons.”

Should You Stay or Should You Go?

You can continue to live in your home during construction with a couple of caveats. There are costs associated with staying in the house during a remodel such as maintaining water, heat, and the electrical systems, but generally they outweigh the cost and

hassle of moving out.

Count on a basement remodel on taking a year from start to finish. This includes all the permitting and planning, design, excavation and construction.

When You Go Low, They Go High.

As with any construction project in the Bay Area, be prepared for a bit of sticker shock.

“When working with reputable and experienced design-build firms or contractors, an 850 square foot basement addition will cost, on average, between \$600 to \$800 per square foot,” said Mond. “However, keep in mind, with most East Bay homes selling for over \$1,000 a square foot, a basement addition adds significant value to your home. Never a bad thing when it’s time to sell.”

So go on, get down with your bad self.

Resource

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Kevin Mond