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Crowded suburbs mean it's often easier to forget extra storeys and instead create a basement

Australia's cities are becoming increasingly crowded, which is putting a premium on space. But homeowners often face height restrictions. So instead, they're building down, rather than up, and increasingly transforming basements into livable spaces.

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At the top end of the market, the humble basement has now become the new status symbol. Prestige homeowners are creating and demanding not just multiple car spots for their basements, but also luxury facilities such as gymnasiums, home cinemas and **wine** cellars.

"As people want more space and as density increases, people will be making more use of sub-floor spaces," says Sydney architect Michael MacCormick.

"Every client of ours now wants to turn their basement space into a habitable room." The trend is also being financially driven: "It adds capital value to their home because they're getting an additional use," MacCormick says.

But basements can be one of the most expensive inclusions and renovations in a home.

MacCormick recently worked with Sydney couple Simone and James Marshall to create a cool basement area when they renovated their Sirius Cove waterfront home at Mosman on the city's north shore.

They decided to turn a disused and damp storage space into an entertainment and music area that could be accessed through the garage and via an internal stairwell.

"We were looking for a space where the kids could go and watch a movie or play and let us sit and have dinner upstairs," Simone says.

Basements are typically associated with American and English living; though in high-density inner-city areas such as Paddington in Sydney, basements have been a key feature of terrace houses.

But as Australia's population surges and councils impose building height restrictions, more Australians are turning to basements to create space. MacCormick says councils are more likely to look favourably on these types of alterations if the additional floor space is largely within the existing walls.

Through their basement renovation, the Marshalls essentially turned their two-storey house into a three storey one. "It now feels like a three-level house rather than a two-level house," Simone says. "It makes the house feel more like one place; the flow is fantastic for us." The basement is more than an entertainment room; there is also a separate area that has become a music room. The area can also be used as guest quarters for interstate visitors: the Marshalls installed a bathroom and there is a bed that folds down from the wall; it's also a study space for James.

Simone says a lot of people around their area are digging down, in part because it's neighbour friendly. "If you try to go up you're going to take people's view," she says.

A basement allows homeowners to tuck away the study, movie room and guest quarters. They can save the main ground floor areas for "wonderful big living spaces with great views".

At the very top end of the market, basements have actually become status symbols and deliver bragging rights.

Don Ravida, the managing director of boutique Melbourne builder Ravida, says five or six years ago, basements were something that were only done in and around Toorak. "They've certainly spread further into the suburbs, albeit still mainly affluent areas," he says. "We're doing quite a few basements and lifts these days." Ravida, whose **company** built the high-profile mansion at 8 Maxwell Court, Toorak, says the steep price of land is driving the trend. "By having a basement you just get so much more out of the property; you can achieve more garden and you have just got a whole other level below with parking." It can also improve street presentation of a house. "You get a nice symmetrical classical-looking home that isn't dominated by a two-garage door," he says.

Ravida says the typical top-end basement now has parking for up to six cars, a foyer, cinema room and **wine** cellar. The basement at his Toorak home has parking space for four cars, a gymnasium, **wine** cellar, cloak room, laundry, and an entertainment room with bar. The **wine** cellar is climate controlled, with racking for 500 bottles; Ravida sometimes sets up a **wine** tasting table in there.

Jim Malone of Classic Cellars installs custom **wine** cellars in homes and basements. He has also witnessed a boom in basement development and use, while **wine** collecting is becoming increasingly popular with the **Chinese** community.

"You can't **buy** anything for under \$1 **million** and there are height restrictions and all sorts of regulations," he says. "What people are doing is they're putting in underground car parking, home theatres, games rooms and **wine** cellars, and building the house on top of that.

"Much the same is happening in our Sydney office, where land is even more expensive." In addition to **wine** cellars, Malone provides basement construction. He has also partnered with a home theatre **company** to create basement cinemas.

**Wine** cellars "can be a bit of a show-off item", Malone says. "But most of our customers are true **wine** buffs, and for them it's the pleasure of buying something today that won't be available in five years' time and cellaring it." A typical fit out for a custom-made 2000-bottle cellar is \$25,000; another \$5000 gives you room temperature control.

MacCormick says basements also offer creative options, particularly if sandstone and old brickwork can be exposed. If they have existing structures that can be retained, "the existing structure or sandstone can become a feature of the room and makes for an interesting space for architects to work with and owners to live with." There are challenges with basements. Ravida says basements mean houses are much more expensive to build. "The whole method of construction becomes different," he says. "You have a big structure below ground." Cameron Frazer, general manager of Archicentre, the building advisory service for the Australian Institute of Architects, agrees basements are expensive.

"Excavation is one of the most expensive things you can do," he says. "They create a number of challenges that more simple buildings built up from ground normally don't bring." Given that expense, there is a debate over whether basements add to the value of a house. Ravida says in the right suburbs, they do.

Frazer says whether basements add value depends on various factors, including the size of the basement and the complexity of excavation.

He says one couple in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton excavated for a building and found a water course that repeatedly flooded. "It took them two months working with the builder to redirect and manage the problem," he says.

Frazer advises consulting architects, but also valuers and agents to get a sense of whether a basement will add value. "I would never say it's a straight equation that digging a basement will add value," he says.

"Like any renovation it will deliver return on investment if carefully planned and thought through and consulted on." Still, "if money is no object, then it probably doesn't matter much." The Marshalls themselves did some excavation to ensure the ceiling heights were legal. Simone says the basement work has definitely added value. "It effectively gave the house two more living areas and a bathroom, as

well as giving us a cellar wall," she says. "The house itself seems a lot bigger." MacCormick says basements add value if they add a missing function to a house, such as a guest bedroom, home theatre, home office or study, rumpus room space or cellar. "These spaces are all features that real-estate agents like to be able to mention when marketing a house," he says. He says the trend for basements will continue to grow. "It's going to happen more and more as people want more space or more people to live in the house."

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