Decor Score: This basement is a bargain

by Rose_Bennett_Gilbert

Q: We have seven children (under 18 and living at home). We moved into my house because it had the most bedrooms (four), but we are still strapped for living space. My husband thinks we should renovate the basement, but that seems so '50s to me - having a "rec room" in the basement. Do you have any other suggestions?

A: Race to your nearest bookstore to buy a copy of "Easy Home WORLD DOWN THERE - You can find gracious new living space at the bottom of the basement stairs. CNS Photo by Lydia Cutter. Makeovers," a smart new book by Mervyn Kaufman (Filipacchi Publishing). With his broad experience in home design and renovating, Kaufman has pulled together 160 pages of bright ideas for the space-shy and decor-deprived. Of special interest to you, the entertainment center we show here is located - ta dum! - in a renovated basement. It's just part of a new living area that also includes a home office, bathroom, wet bar, exercise room and play area for the kids.

You could borrow the ideas and maybe use the space for a bedroom, too. You had better check your local codes first because some prohibit basement bedrooms for reasons of safety and health.

At least, you could turn the below-grade space into an above-average recreation area for the entire family. That's what happened here when designer Peggy Fisher went to work. The built-in cabinets neatly organize the entertainment equipment; Arts and Craftsy furnishings make the space cool and stylish; a soft palette of earthy colors lends sophistication you might not expect to find "below stairs," as the English say.

The bottom line: space is where you find it. A competent design team can help you handle the nitty-gritty of raw basement spaces, such as ductwork, support columns and necessities like furnaces and hot water heaters. Then a good interior designer can turn that erstwhile "rec room" into worthwhile family living space.

NEW DESIGN IDEAS

Ever wonder where do new design ideas come from?

The answer is: from all over the world, to judge from Design Lab '07, the fifth competition sponsored by Electrolux, the manufacturer of home and professional appliances (including equipment for the kitchen and laundry, as well as its famous vacuum cleaners).

Based on its Scandinavian design heritage and what company execs call "holistic, thoughtful design," Electrolux seeks innovative home appliance ideas from design students all over the world.

The latest Design Lab, held in November in Paris, was an eight-ring circus of eco-friendly ideas, drawing finalists from Europe, Asia, South America and the U.S. The students' out-of-the-box inventions included a composter and garbage bin that uses microorganisms to decompose organic waste, and an ingenious "fog" shower that needs only 2 liters of water for five minutes of washing (today's most efficient showers take a whopping 26 liters).

Another finalist proposed a solar food cooker that utilizes spray-on solar cells and induction heating. Another offered a rotating dual kitchen sink and water-saving, detergent-free dishwasher. A student from South Korea came up with a solar-powered air cleaner for indoor use; another, from China, designed an energy-saving refrigerator with an interior honeycomb of individual compartments.

The student from the U.S. (Juan Ying-Hao of Cranbrook Academy of Art) suggested a decomposer that turns certain plastic bags into compost for plants.

Top winner, named by a panel of celebrity judges (including Celine Cousteau, granddaughter of Jacques Cousteau, and Henrik Otto, head of global design at Electrolux), was Levente Szabo, a student at Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design in Budapest. For a prize worth 5,000 Euros and a six-month internship at an Electrolux Design Center, Szabo dreamed up a washing machine that uses "soap nuts" to clean

clothes. His new-fangled "e-wash" is actually based on a centuries-old idea: using a natural plant (sapindus mukorossi) instead of eco-unfriendly detergent.

The soap nut is native to India and Nepal, Szabo explained at the gala awards ceremony. Soap nuts are also non-allergenic and long-lasting (about 2 pounds of nuts will typically wash a year's worth of clothes, he said).

But don't rush to invest heavily in soap nuts. It will be a while - if ever - before these innovations find their way to your home. The real purpose of the Design Lab project is communication, according to Henrik Otto. "It's about getting designers, manufacturers and consumers to make conscious choices (for earth-friendly products) in their daily lives." See more at www.electrolux.com.

Rose Bennett Gilbert is the co-author of "Hampton Style" and associate editor of Country Decorating Ideas. Please send your questions to her at P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190, or by e-mail.

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