

# Hidden depths

Imaginative conversions of basements and cellars reveal a host of possibilities. Amelia Thorpe digs deep for the latest trends

Words AMELIA THORPE



**W**ith space in prime city areas at a premium, the trend for going underground to create basements and convert cellars shows no sign of letting up.

With the cost of moving increasingly expensive, the possibilities of extending upwards and outwards in space-restricted city areas difficult (while basement conversions often don't require planning permission), and a general shortage of supply of properties in areas such as central London, staying put and digging down is often seen as the best way of boosting space.

'As a broad average, basements are beginning to command the same square footage price [as other floors in a property], and they have become far more accepted over the past four to five years because of modern engineering and architecture,' says Richard Barber, partner of prime central London estate agency WA Ellis.

The starting point is to work out how the new basement will be used. 'The

preparation and planning need to be done very carefully to get maximum value for money,' advises Rosie Caley, design director of BasementWorks and London Wine Rooms. And she is quick to dispel a myth. 'People often think that it will be easier and cheaper if there is an existing cellar, but actually it doesn't really matter whether there is or not,' she says. 'To make an existing cellar habitable, it's usually necessary to underpin the entire perimeter (because historically most houses were built with shallow foundations), take down the existing walls to get the head height, and add new floor slab and underfloor heating. We usually need to go down 3.2m to give a standard room height of 2.7m, and because we still need to underpin substantially it doesn't really make a difference to the cost whether there is a cellar there already.'

Caley offers a guide cost of £1,900 a square metre for the structural work, underpinning, excavation, steel work and screed, but not including fit-out and decoration. 'It is more



disruptive and can be more controversial than other work on a house, because it takes longer and involves moving large amounts of subsoil for disposal, and it often involves underpinning a party wall,' she says candidly. 'By its very nature, it is a more invasive procedure than a kitchen extension or a loft conversion, but the reason for it is to generate an entire floor of living space.'

When it comes to working out how the space will be used, Alex Jaggs, interior architect at Finchatton, recommends close consultation with clients. 'The elegant ceiling heights of the ground and first floor of many London houses start to get lower on the upper floors, but in contrast there are unlimited possibilities in the basement,' he says. 'You can have a freer rein downstairs — after all, you aren't changing the exterior of the property — and create what your client wants.' For Jaggs, this has meant installing a Formula 1 simulator in one scheme and a mock driving range in another. ▶

#### FLOORED BY WINE

Above right: A retractable round glass trap door by Spiral Cellars allows wine to be stored in a floor well, an alternative to a basement or cellar

#### ROOM WITH A VIEW

Below, this lower-level gym has a feature glass wall by architectural glass specialist IQ Glass, allowing a pleasant view and a flood of natural light

#### BASEMENT BUSTER

This basement bar features a bronze-topped leather-clad bar and dark linen walls plus a mood-lighting system, in a private home designed by Tara Bernard & Partners





Luxurious home cinemas and private bars are often called for. 'I like to approach basements with a sense of fun,' he says. 'This is where you can introduce rich, sumptuous textures and finishes such as highly lacquered timber and bronze finishes, and moody lighting to create atmosphere and glamour.'

Other regular requests are for wine rooms and gyms, while swimming pools (but they need plant rooms too, so lots of space is usually necessary), spas, children's TV and play rooms, ensuite bedrooms for guests or staff, utility/laundry rooms, storage, and garage space (especially if the basement has two floors) are also on the list. 'One client might be a film buff and want total darkness and good acoustics, another might be a gym bunny who wants maximum natural light, greenery in an internal garden, and Zen-like peace and quiet,' he says.

'Living spaces and bedrooms need to be adjacent to a light well, so they can have windows for natural light and ventilation, so they tend to be the front and/or back of the basement,' explains Caley. 'The footprint of a typical Victorian house is long and narrow, so they tend not to have space at the side of the property for a light well.' Ancillary rooms less needy of natural light, such as laundry rooms, shower rooms, plant rooms and storage areas, as well as staircases, are usually best placed in the mid-section.

Interior designer Annabella Nassetti encourages her clients to think imaginatively about their basement space. 'I tend to avoid putting bedrooms there, because it's not easy to get natural light in a basement, whereas an exciting use of the space, such as a luxurious home cinema or beautiful, relaxing Turkish bath, makes clients feel that its money well spent,' she says. She adds that she has recently designed a swimming pool which emerges from the basement floor: 'It's magical: you press a button and a whole section of the floor moves down and electronically fills with water,' she says.

When it comes to thinking about the

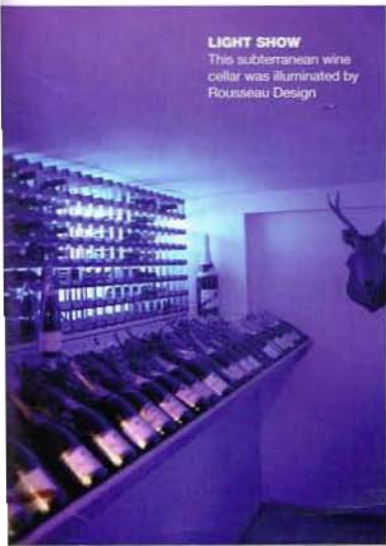


#### SPA PARTNERS

This spa area and basement pool (pictured below) was installed at The Lancasters, Hyde Park, and designed by Intarya

#### LIGHT SHOW

This subterranean wine cellar was illuminated by Rousseau Design





**LIGHT TOUCH**

Right, a family room created in a basement has sliding glass doors to provide maximum light. Far right, walk-on glass panels maximise the flow of natural light into the lightwell and basement, by BasementWorks

**UNDER PLAYED**

The Sub-Zero and Wolf Subterranean Studio features Sub-Zero wine storage units

**HOUSE SPACE**

This basement pool and spa area in a townhouse in Kensington was designed by Joanna Trading



architectural detailing, Caley advises: 'In general, you do not want to replicate the style of the floor above, because this can look horribly pastiche. There might be a beautifully detailed cornice, or period tiled floors there but it's usually best to leave that behind and embrace the modern in the basement, rather than attempting a bad match.' A solid oak or walnut staircase with glass balustrades, very simple doors and square-profile mouldings will signal your entrance to a very different space and establish a new character.

'The hallway should be one of the principal concerns,' she continues. 'When you arrive, you don't want to feel as if you are in a basement.' Consider angling the staircase or twisting it so that you are put into the centre of the space, rather than facing a solid wall, and at all costs avoid a design which features a long, thin underground tunnel with box rooms leading off it, advises Caley. Depending on the architecture of the house, you may be able to introduce a canted wall to the hallway to create the impression of increasing space, while floor-to-ceiling glass panels 'move light around and create a feature in the hall.'

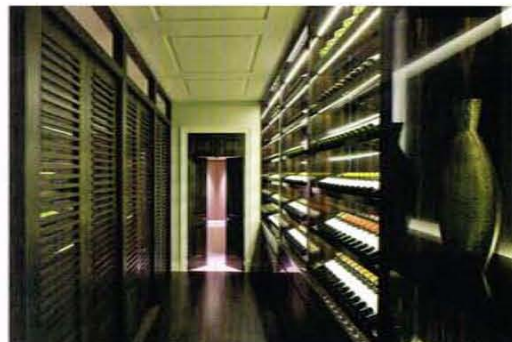
**LIGHTING**

'Why not do something interesting with the lighting? Don't hide away a basement room like a dungeon or think of it as a boring box for storage,' says Ben Rousseau of Rousseau Design. 'Use lighting to make something special of it.' Rousseau favours dramatic and colourful lighting to inject some excitement into an otherwise blank space. A recent wine cellar project included pink lights hidden behind opal acrylic panels, to create a theatrical wash of light and show off the shape of the cellar and the patterns made by the shelving, with the lights sensor-operated.

'Lighting does need to be planned from the beginning because you need to hide away the wiring and components,' advises Rousseau. 'It's also important to attend to the other details in the room, such as tactile surfaces and good flooring, because it does need to feel like a considered and complete space.' ▶

**BACKED UP**

Left, this bespoke wine room was created by Finchatton

**SITTING PRETTY**

Below, this basement media room in a Kensington townhouse was designed by Joanna Trading

**FINE DINING**

Above (at left), a basement space has been made into a dining and kitchen area with glass ceiling, designed by Annastasia Hassetti

**MOVIE MOMENTS**

A cinema room designed by Finchatton was created at basement level in a £32m townhouse in Belgravia

**WINE ROOMS**

The vaulted stone cellars of Burgundy are a romantic picture of wine storage, but not all cellars are the same. Those in townhouses often present less than ideal conditions for storing wine, explains Caley: 'It is important to avoid fluctuations in temperature and humidity levels, as centrally heated homes can be a problem. Proximity to pipes which alternately heat up and cool down is bad news for bottles of wine, leading to potential problems with expansion and contraction of the cork which may allow oxygen into the wine.'

There are various ways of creating ideal conditions: install a purpose-built unit which maintains an even temperature, or create an insulated, conditioned room with a built-in refrigeration unit.

As part of basement conversions, Wine Rooms often designs such a room, an insulated glass wall to separate it from a media room, making a visually striking as well as functional addition to the space.

And when it comes to fittings, Al





recommends including a combination of different types of storage in a wine room, including horizontal shelving for individual bottles, some angled shelving for displaying show-stopping wines, racks for heavy cases, some storage for corkscrews and knives, and some cupboards for things to be kept out of sight. 'Complete with back lighting and bespoke joinery, a wine room can be a real jewel,' he says.

If there isn't space for an entire basement conversion, consider installing a spiral wine cellar under a floor. Spiral Cellars has just introduced a new model with retractable round glass door, which swivels away at the press of a button. 'Our clients are not just looking for the functionality of a cellar, they want it to be a stand-out feature of their home, too,' says Lucy Hargreaves, director of Spiral Cellars. [www.spiralcellars.co.uk](http://www.spiralcellars.co.uk)



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#### SCENE STEALER

This cinema room with screen and speakers in a black suede wall was designed by Rene Dekker and the team at SHH

#### GLASS ACT

Top, a glass floor acts as a light well for the kitchen/breakfast room below in this design by Hill House Interiors

#### WATER WAYS

Above, this pool and leisure room was designed by Rene Dekker and the team at SHH

#### Contacts

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- Hill House Interiors [hillhouseinteriors.com](http://hillhouseinteriors.com)
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- SHH [shh.co.uk](http://shh.co.uk)
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