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# O.C. basements reach new heights

The high points of some Orange County houses are the low points – state-of-the-art basements.

By **JOHN GITTELSOHN**

The Orange County Register

Boston native John Barrett liked the bar in TV's "Cheers" so much, he built one like it - brick walls, wood tables, Bass Ale and Guinness Stout on tap - in his Newport Beach home basement.

Tony Ciabattoni wanted a home movie theater, including a marquee and ticket booth in his Laguna Beach home. He installed it two stories below the street entrance - along with a 1,500-bottle wine cellar.

Ciabattoni's architect, Brion Jeannette, is designing a Corona del Mar home with a pistol range, bowling alley and "testosterone room" decorated with a shotgun collection where guests can smoke cigars while playing pool - all below ground.

For people with over-the-top tastes, the new frontier in Orange County's costliest homes is underground. Faced with skyrocketing desires but limits on height and lot coverage, homeowners are digging down.

"If you don't go subterranean, it won't sell for more than \$10 million," said Steve High, a real-estate agent with Coldwell



**MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME:** Tony Ciabattoni can have friends over for pool.

DANIEL A. ANDERSON, THE  
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## Basement numbers

The Orange County assessor and city governments don't keep tabs on the number of homes with subterranean levels, which could include everything from a street-level garage below a hillside home to an indoor pool. Here is information about a few luxury communities.

The Irvine Co. reports basements in about 50 percent of the homes in Shady Canyon and 75 percent

Banker in Newport Beach. "I'm not talking about people cutting into the side of the hill. I'm talking about movie theaters and basketball courts beneath the ground. I don't know about full courts, but we've had two half-courts."

High and others say today's homebuyers want a big house to go with the big price tags on land. He's selling a lot in Laguna Beach's Montage Ocean Estates listed for \$7.25 million - or \$475 per square foot of land.

The owner of one Montage lot has proposed a 7,500-square-foot home with a 5,000-square-foot basement "for storage."

"One has two levels below ground, and the Design Review Board isn't receiving that well," Liane Schuller, Laguna Beach's zoning administrator, said of another Montage proposal.

Newport Beach building officials began seeing the trend in the late '90s, after renovation excavations prompted complaints from neighbors of cracking windows and shifting foundations.

In response, the city now requires permits to pump water from low-lying lots as well as heavy construction shoring with I-beams that can add \$500,000 to construction bills.

"Almost all the new construction on Lido Island comes with a basement," said Jay Elbettar, director of the Newport Beach Building Department. "They're almost literally constructed in the bay."

Not all homes with basements are custom-designed. In The Tides, a 30-lot community in Crystal Cove, **Standard Pacific Homes** offers a model with a 3,000-square-foot underground garage and 1,200 square feet of underground living space.

Newport Beach contractor Kent Johnsen said it typically costs \$150 to \$200 more per square foot to build under than above ground, although others said basement prices vary widely depending on materials and soil conditions.

of those approved for Crystal Cove communities.

The Newport Beach Building Department says it receives an average of five requests per year for infill or rebuilt homes with basements, compared with two per year in the 1990s.

The 14 custom-home sites in Laguna Beach's Montage Ocean Estates, where a -1/3-acre lot is selling for \$7.25 million, are all expected to have basements.

### Why so few basements?

Home basements are common outside California, inspiring countless movie scenes, from "The Wizard of Oz" to "Wayne's World."

The need to build a foundation below the frost line - or safe from tornadoes - makes basements a necessity elsewhere, said Janette Heartwood, an architect and curator of "Hillside Homes," a current exhibit at the Laguna Art Museum.

"Frank Lloyd Wright said it makes no sense to have basements here," Heartwood said, citing America's most famous 20th-century architect. "In those days, there was plenty of space."

### Other reasons underground rooms are uncommon in California:

Earthquake codes require costly reinforced structures.

Flood-prone areas, designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, prohibit them.

Reliable waterproofing of rooms built in shifting earth is a challenge.

Going underground increases construction costs \$150 to \$200 per square foot - or much more depending on soil conditions and materials.

Peter Hemphill, project manager of The Tides, a 30-lot development by Standard Pacific Homes in Crystal Cove, said basements are not for every home.

"Special contractors, the cost and overall complexity has to make the

On high-cost land, adding square footage wherever you can adds value.

"People are building for \$400, \$500 or \$600 a square foot, but homes are selling for \$1,000 a

square foot," said John Henderson, architect of seven custom homes with underground levels currently under way in the **Irvine Co.** developments of Shady Canyon and Crystal Cove. "It makes economic sense."

land very scarce, extremely expensive or both," said Hemphill, whose model homes offer 3,000-square-foot underground garages. "It's going to be a while before it creeps off the coast."

Going underground is also a way to add space without blocking valuable views. Ciabattoni's 8,300-square-foot oceanfront home, completed in 2001, replaced a cottage once owned by Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and an oleander hedge that had obscured Victoria Beach.

"I provided value to neighbors by opening up their views," said Ciabattoni, an investor and developer. "And I got the things I wanted for my house."

Now from street level, just a two-car garage and a tower with an office and a spare bedroom are visible. Visitors descend a stairway to a stone courtyard - with a small chapel - that spills into the living room, kitchen and main bedroom. An interior staircase spirals to the basement, which has a wet bar, pool table, shuffleboard court, wine cellar, home theater with a 10-foot screen and an outdoor pool that he calls "my poor man's version of the Playboy grotto."

Imitation-stone retaining walls make the home appear to grow from the rocks. In other homes, Ciabattoni's architect, Jeannette, finished basement interiors with fake rocks, aquariums and eerie lighting to enhance the underground ambience. A 30,000-square-foot Corona del Mar waterfront home required a 20-foot-deep crater for a theater, bowling alley, wine cellar and "auto museum."

"The clients were asking us to challenge the normal way of thinking," Jeannette said.

Most of the underground spaces have a strong male bias - retreats for men to admire their cars, exercise, do woodworking or hang out with their buddies.

In 2004, John Barrett replaced a 1970s ranch home in Newport Beach's Harbor View neighborhood with a 6,000-square-foot house, including a 2,000-square-foot basement.

"It's like a frat house, but the good thing is that the men don't go anywhere," his wife, Elena Barrett, said of the downstairs lair, where he hosts poker nights and parties where guests watch his 96-inch projection TV while enjoying his on-tap beer.

John Ursini, a restaurateur and grateful neighbor, helped himself to Barrett's Guinness during a gathering to watch an NCAA basketball game.

"Beer is the most important thing," Ursini said.