

# Vroom Rooms

**The garage may be the last frontier of home renovation, but you don't have to be a car collector to see the potential in this once-cluttered space**

You've already overhauled the kitchen and bathrooms, added a pool house with outdoor kitchen and bar, and organized the closets with modular storage systems. What's left to improve? Hint: Have you looked in your garage lately?

Once a cluttered repository for garden tools, miscellaneous junk, and maybe even your car, the humble garage is going designer. For many, it's the last frontier of the complete home makeover, a big open room that can be converted to a spacious showplace for a car collector or an activity center for the hobbyist.

You can go as far as your imagination and budget allow. Baton Rouge architect Kevin Harris is designing a \$1 million, 4,000-square-foot, four-car garage for a client who wants walk-in storage closets, elevator access to the house, and pet condos for 10 dogs and cats (with videoconference facilities so the owners can keep in touch with their animals when they travel).

In part, garages have gotten bigger to accommodate such multiple roles. Today, 15% of new homes have a garage large enough for three cars or more, according to the National Association of Home Builders. In 1992, it was just 6%. Archway Press, a New York company that sells detailed blueprints for houses and garages, has been ramping up the size and complexity of its garage designs to meet demand. For example, one Archway blueprint gives plans for a free-standing, 10-car structure with a 2,700-square-foot apartment above it.

A garage's main purpose continues to be storing cars, but that doesn't mean it has to look like a garage. Driving into David Rodrigues' four-car garage is like entering your family room. The Pewaukee (Wis.) builder spent \$20,000 just on wood-paneled walls, red alder pantry-style cabinets, and a bronze stained floor. There are also wall-mounted racks for golf and ski gear, and a lift system to keep his Heritage Harley-Davidson motorcycle off the floor.

Lawyer Bob Wade spent about \$275,000 to build an unassuming 2,400-square-foot cedar garage at the foot of his driveway in Northampton County in eastern Pennsylvania. But inside, it's more like a museum to house his collection of six classic cars, including a 1965 Porsche Cabriolet. The space features a 130-square-foot work area and a hydraulic car lift. It even has a shower so Wade can clean up when he's finished working on the cars.

Increasingly, though, owners are revamping their garages, or at least part of them, into livable spaces where they can spend time on everything from hobbies to hosting wine tastings. Zev Pomerance, who owns garage outfitter Potomac Garage in Gaithersburg, Md., says his clients want to spiff up the garage because it's the real gateway to the home. "Neighbors, friends, family -- they all enter the house from the garage," he says.

A lot of people keep an extra refrigerator in the garage. Now, entire kitchens are sharing space with the Volvo and Harley. Dan Lajoie, who runs Gourmet Garages in Wallingford, Conn., says he's currently designing a garage for a doctor who loves to cook. It includes a butcher-block food prep area and storage for pots and pans.

In a few weeks, Michael Cardenas, who owns eight restaurants in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, will be moving his 2,000-bottle wine collection from a spare bedroom in his Malibu (Calif.) home to a new temperature-controlled wine cellar in the garage he's having renovated. The project, which cost around \$35,000, also includes cabinets for storing pans, plates, linens, and other catering supplies.

If you would like to create your own über-garage, start by checking out Bill West's *Your Garagenous Zone: Innovative Ideas for the Garage*. The book includes architectural layouts for garages that can "enhance the appearance of the home" without it being the first, biggest thing you see when you look at the house. There's also a section on garage-appropriate materials and accessories, such as flooring and shelves, with information on the companies that sell them.

Auto buffs should pick up Richard Newton's *Ultimate Garage Handbook*. Companies such as [GarageTek](#), The Complete Garage, or Garage Envy specialize in refurbishing garages with cabinets and storage systems, lighting, and epoxy or tile flooring. You can buy the products and do it yourself, or the companies can arrange for installation. For the really big project, you may want to hire an architect and contractor.

It's one thing to equip your current garage with such showstoppers as marble countertops, skylights, and humidity controls. But if you want to build or expand a garage so it's more like an extension of your living space, be sure to check the local zoning laws. In older neighborhoods, you may be thwarted by rules that limit the amount of space structures can occupy to 50% or less of the lot size. If you want to build up instead of out -- say, to add an in-law apartment above the garage -- you may encounter limits on the number of residential units allowed in areas zoned for single-family dwellings. Another issue, warns John Connell, an architect in Warren, Vt., arises if your plans include a built-in automotive lift or pit. It will raise building inspectors' concerns about the disposal of oil or other hazardous substances that can cause environmental problems.

Of course, if everything you want to do in your garage adds up to more space than you can legally create, you always have an easy way to get better use from your existing garage. Just park your car in the driveway.