

After \$12,000, There's Even Room to Park the Car

by David Kocieniewski

WESTBURY, N.Y. — Angela Aloï used to begin a tour of her family's new dream house on Long Island the same way as any other proud suburban homeowner.



Joseph J. Delconzo for The New York Times

Evangeline and Nicholas Copolla of Monmouth County, N.J., hired a garage specialty company to redesign and organize their storage space.

She would guide her visitors to the icons of affluence adorning her colonial-style home: the two-story foyer, the granite kitchen counters and stainless steel appliances, the cedar deck and slate patio. But when she reached the family room — just past the big screen TV and marble bar — she would quickly pivot, using her body to seal off the door to the garage as if she were a human deadbolt.

"No one was going to see that mess if I could help it," she said. "It was a landfill. Christmas decorations, bikes, clothes, Little League equipment, box after box of junk. And six hammers, because every time we needed one we'd have to buy a new one because we couldn't find the others. I'd tell my husband, 'That garage is the sign of a sick, sick mind.'"

But late last year, Mrs. Aloï, her husband and their three children finally managed to conquer their family dumping ground and turn it into the latest suburban status symbol, the designer garage.

The indoor landfill was replaced by bright floors made of durable, easy-to-clean plastic tiles and a clutter-free matrix of plastic storage bins. The arrangement is so tidy that there is room for the family S.U.V. and enough space for a pantry, lawn and garden supplies, sporting equipment, tools and even a weight bench.

Hoping to avert an onslaught of relentless renovation jokes, the Aloïs have avoided telling neighbors that they spent \$8,000 to have a professional organizer do the makeover.

But they might be surprised at the sympathetic response: Suburban homeowners are so full of angst, guilt, despair and frustration over their bulging garages that they spent \$800 million on garage organizing products last year, double the amount spent in 2000, according to the market research firm Packaged Facts. Alleviating that garage guilt could easily cost \$12,000 per job.

The amount of money spent on garage makeovers is expected to rise by 10 percent a year for the rest of the decade, making garage organizing one of the fastest growing segments of the home improvement market.

The National Association of Professional Organizers estimates that more than 500 organizing businesses specialize in

garages, twice as many as in 2000. But for those who want to tackle the job themselves, there is assortments of new storage systems that make your grandfather's pegboard seem absolutely Paleolithic.



Joseph J. Delconzo for The New York Times
The redesign of Evangeline and Nicholas Copolla's garage in Monmouth County, N.J., included wall-mounted storage bins.

"In the 80's, it was California Closets," said Bill West, author of "Your Garagenous Zone: Innovative Ideas for the Garage," one of a half-dozen books on the subject of messy garages. "But today, garages are where it's all happening."

In some ways, it's odd that suburban homeowners would be turning to garage feng shui just now. According to the National Association of Homebuilders, the size of the average new house built in the United States increased more than 50 percent between 1970 and 2004, even as the size of the average family grew smaller. Internet sites like eBay were supposed to help homeowners turn their clutter into cash by feeding the habits of pack rats across globe. Even garages themselves have grown: 83% of all new homes built in 2004 had two- or three-car garages, double the number in 1970.

But the surge in online retailing and a flood of inexpensive imported goods has made it all too easy for recreational shoppers to overfill their McMansions. So the landscape of countless American subdivisions now features a peculiar anomaly: three-car garages so crammed with junk that the three cars are parked in the driveway.

At the Costa home in Shrewsbury, N.J., the decision to spend \$12,000 on an intervention for their wayward garage was born of equal parts exasperation and shame. Barbara Costa, her husband, Vincent, and their three children, had packed so much into their garage that their cars would frequently get scratched by garbage cans and bicycle handle bars. To make matters worse, their next door neighbor's garage was a portrait of orderliness.

"You could eat off the floor over there," she said. "He's a fanatic about it. You always see him tidying up and keeping after people to pick things up. But when you see how beautiful his garage is, you've got to give the guy credit."

The Costas tried a home remedy at first, renting industrial-size trash-hauling bins to clear out anything expendable. But in a matter of months, the garage was once again a cluttered, confusing mess.

Late last year, the situation grew so dire that the Costas considered a radical procedure, adding a third bay to their two-car garage. That is when they received a flier in the mail from a garage organizing company and decided that the steep price was still more economical than a construction project.

"We just have to be certain to keep it that way," she said. "Or else I'll have to go ask my neighbor for advice."

There are no reliable numbers to determine how many overhauled garages manage to stave off the inexorable tide of possessions over the long run. But the National Association of Professional Organizers Web site offers a provocative bit of encouragement, citing a survey taken by the Ikea furniture company in 2001 that inexplicably asserted that 31% of respondents got more satisfaction from cleaning a closet than having sex.

Barry Izsak, the association's president, said that while some consumers can be reluctant to pay for professional help, which can run upward of \$200 an hour, he rarely hears complaints from garage owners who do take the plunge.

Mr. Izsak said that the problem that leads most garages down the path to sloth is a lack of clear vision. The garage is one of the few rooms used by everyone in a family, and often the largest in the house, but all that unstructured space turns into a catch-all. "People keep all this worthless junk, 5-foot piles of National Geographics being eaten by mice and colonized by silverfish," Mr. Izsak said.

"It's just plain weird," he said.

Peter Walsh, a psychologist who earned the job description of celebrity organizer as host of the cable television program "Clean Sweep" for four seasons, has expanded his focus from treating the symptoms of clutter to pondering its causes.

"There's an orgy of consumption going on in this country," said Mr. Walsh, who later this year will release a book titled "It's All Too Much" (Free Press), about the psychology of clutter. Mr. Walsh acknowledges that he is a lonely voice calling for a new era of American asceticism.

"This is the Super size-Me society," he said. "So it's going to take a while."

In the meantime, the professional organizing community can take comfort in people like Cary Africk of Montclair, N.J., a recidivist de-clutterer. A few years ago, he hired a local company called In Order to dig out the blizzard of paper in his engineering office. It worked so well that he brought them back the next year to reclaim his addled basement. Last year, Mr. Africk hired the company to take back the scrap heap that had once been his garage.

Mr. Africk said that as long as American society continues to inundate people with paperwork and possessions, he will be willing to pay for all the organizing help he can get.

"Do you think there's anyone out there who can help make sense out of all the junk and files in my computer?" he said.