

## THE HOME FRONT

# Safe at Home—in the Garage

*In Down Economy, Garages  
Become Remodelers' Target;  
Where Do the Cars Go?*

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**I**N THE LAST FEW weeks, Wally Fisk has been spending a lot of time in his new garage. And why not? It has oak floors and room for five television sets, not to mention a ceramics workshop, an archery range and his prize 1932 Gar Wood speedboat. Oh, he has cars in there, too.

"My garage feels like home," says the retired construction-equipment maker, who actually spent Sept. 11 sitting in his boat watching the news.

He isn't the only one seeking refuge in his garage. With renovations on the rest of the house getting more expensive, more Americans are taking a new look at their oil-stained outbuildings. Some folks have turned them into everything from bars to basketball courts to survival centers — and still have room for their cars. Others are employing fancy storage gizmos or new "mezzanines" for their junk. There is even a whole new coffee-table book on garages, which author Kira Obolensky dubs the home's "final frontier."

**How's your 'Garagenous  
Zone'? That's  
what the author of a new  
book on garage  
organizing asks.**

Bottom line: Business is up at garage remodelers all over the country, including Designer Doors, where sales of custom-made garage doors are up 25% this year. Recent events, which are keeping people at home more, have only speeded things up, particularly for businesses catering to the nervous. Web site Survival-center-

com, for example, says its traffic has quadrupled since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., as consumers search out 55-gallon water drums and power generators for their garages.

Gussying up the garage isn't always as easy as it sounds. These are, after all, pretty basic structures, with concrete floors, thin walls and no plumbing or heating. Making one fit for human habitation can mean putting in everything from a floor to a heater, plus finding a way to co-exist with the cars. When Lynn Wadsworth and David Amdur moved to St. Paul, Minn., for instance, they spent \$20,000 making their garage into an art studio as well (she is a sculptor; he is a painter). Once it was built, they found staring at the cars less than inspiring, so they put up a wall to hide them. The bigger problem: Though their garage is insulated, the high ceilings make it tough to warm up, so in the winter they have to turn on the heat an hour before they are ready to go out and work.

### Where to Put the Stuff?

Then there is the question of where to put all the stuff that accumulates in garages — lawn mowers, old refrigerators, boxes of clothes, unused exercise equipment. That problem has given birth to a whole garage-storage industry peddling everything from a pair of \$12 "MultiStor" hanging brackets for lawn chairs and wheelbarrows to a \$6,000 GarageTek system, which creates a mezzanine storage level, plus a workbench, cabinets, tool holders and 600 square feet of wall paneling. "Garage organization is now where closet organization was 20 years ago," says Marc Shuman, GarageTek's president.

For much of the '90s, the trend in garages was best described in one word: bigger. Of course, many Americans still want space big enough for a fleet of minivans. But they also want a place to work, to indulge their interests and even to entertain, all within the safety of their own homes. It's a lot cheaper to do all that in the garage than in the rest of the house: Builders and architects estimate that remodeling the garage costs between

\$25 and \$100 a square foot. Redoing the inside of your house starts at about \$100 a square foot and can go much higher.

It cost Arny and Gretchen Stromberg \$20,000 to do the garage version of a tear-down, demolishing their old detached structure and building what appears to be a cute, brick house in its place, complete with windows, shutters and a white front door flanked by flower boxes. Now, just for fun, they invite neighbors over to press their garage door opener. The entire brick front of the little house lifts up to reveal their cars. The Lexington, Ky., couple are quick to point out that after the makeover the appraisal on their property jumped to \$250,000 from \$199,000. "Most garages are ugly and monstrous-looking," Mrs. Stromberg says. "A garage doesn't have to be that way."

Mortgage banker Bob Sheets spent a hefty \$40,000 to turn his Minnesota garage into a "drive-in sports bar," including antique bricks from a demolished Chicago warehouse, recessed lighting, a stereo system, two televisions, a 1940s Texaco gas pump and 60 neon signs. He says it was money well spent. "I'd rather have friends over for a party in my garage than go out to a bar somewhere," he says.

### Steel Mesh and Display Boards

Still, many suburbanites continue to want a big box, not just for parking, but for all their junk. That's why almost 17% of new homes built last year had garages that could fit three or more cars, up from 12% in 1993, according to the National Association of Homebuilders. For people who still can't squeeze their cars in among the excess stuff, Bill West, a Fort Collins, Colo., real-estate agent, has published "Your Garagenous Zone," a book filled with such garage advice as, "if it's on the floor, it's time to store." Among his recommendations: steel mesh affixed to the ceiling for heavy objects such as snow tires and display boards like the ones retailers use for hanging items.

The fact is, once people have redone the kitchen and the bath, there isn't much of the house left to redo, making the garage a prime target for the remodeling industry. Older baby boomers are "finish-

(over please)

## Ways to Remodel

With more people remodeling, there's now a whole industry of garage-improvement products. Here are some we found.

COMPANY/PRICE	WHAT IT IS	COMMENT
<b>GarageScape</b> approx. \$3,700 per door www.garagescape.com	Hidden garage-door system	Your garage blends into your home's exterior, confusing neighbors about where you park your car. Luckily, you carry the remote.
<b>GarageTek Inc.</b> approx. \$6,000 for 2-car garage www.garagetek.com	Garage organization service	To make room for your cars, GarageTek installs a storage "mezzanine" plus workbench, cabinets, tool holders, wall paneling, shelves — even golf-bag and bike racks.
<b>Designer Doors</b> \$2,500 to \$10,000 per door www.designerdoorm.com	Maker of hand-crafted wooden garage doors	Company offers doors to withstand hurricanes; callers have been asking about attack-proof models.
<b>Your Garagenous Zone</b> \$18.95 www.garagenouszone.com	Book and Web site with garage organization tips	Web site offers tips for do-it-yourselfers—such as "organize to visualize; if you can see it, you can find it"—and links to other garage products.
<b>HyLoft USA</b> approx. \$149 www.hyliftusa.com	Steel mesh overhead storage system	It can hold items as heavy as snow tires, and won't interfere with garage door openers.
<b>MultiStor bracket</b> \$12 a pair www.modfarm.com	Small plastic bracket for hanging large items	Mounted onto a wall stud, one can hold 80 pounds. Good for small ladders, wheelbarrows, lawn chairs. Cheap way to start uncluttering your garage.

ing up inside their homes and moving on" to the garage, says Greg Alford of the Peachtree Consulting Group, of Atlanta, which recently studied Americans' garage spending.

Some people are even blending their homes and garages. Car collector Jim Hull, a retired designer of children's furniture, recently sold his Brentwood, Calif., home and 14-car garage. He had a hydraulic lift in his living room where, for parties, he would display such classics as his 1965 Ferrari. "Cars are like works of

art," he says. "Why not display them in your home?" His new house in Malibu will include a living room capable of displaying five cars, and a 5,000-square-foot garage with second-floor guest quarters. Dinner will be served on a balcony overlooking his sea of cars.

Meanwhile Mr. Sheets, who turned his garage into a sports bar, says his wife always knows where to find him. "My view of the world is that a man's garage is his castle," he says. "You have the house attached for resale."