

CHOICES

# A great home starts at the bottom

By Allison E. Beatty  
Special to the Tribune

When buying a new home, don't forget the long-term potential that lies in the basement.

That lower level space can one day become the ultimate entertainment center, with a plasma television and theater with surround sound. Or it might be a perfect hideaway for visiting relatives.

While it is much more fun to plan a new kitchen, the basement space deserves some consideration before the house is built. After all, it is often extremely difficult—and costly—to enlarge the basement later. The decisions you make now about the size and depth of the basement will affect you for years to come.

Depending on the builder, there are several basement options available. Some floor plans may include a partial basement that covers 50 percent to 75 percent of the space under the house. Others might have a full basement—or the option of expanding from a partial to a full basement for an extra fee.

"A home may come with a partial basement and a crawl space and close to 75 percent of the time [home buyers] will upgrade to a full basement," said Gail Payonk, director of marketing for Wiseman-Hughes Enterprises, which is building Windett Ridge in Yorkville. Homes there are priced from \$272,900 to \$371,900.

The cost to upgrade to a full basement typically is \$2,800 to \$4,000, she said.

When buying a new house, think about how you might use the basement one day. Will you want a large recreation room for the kids, a hobby room or a bedroom for visiting relatives?

After sketching out a rough floor plan, you can save room for a bathroom and add a few windows in the appropriate places.

While most basements are completely below grade, there are some home sites that allow for more flexibility—and natural light. In developments with changing terrain, a builder often carves out some lots to take advantage of the conditions.

There are "look-out" basements, often called "English basements," and there are

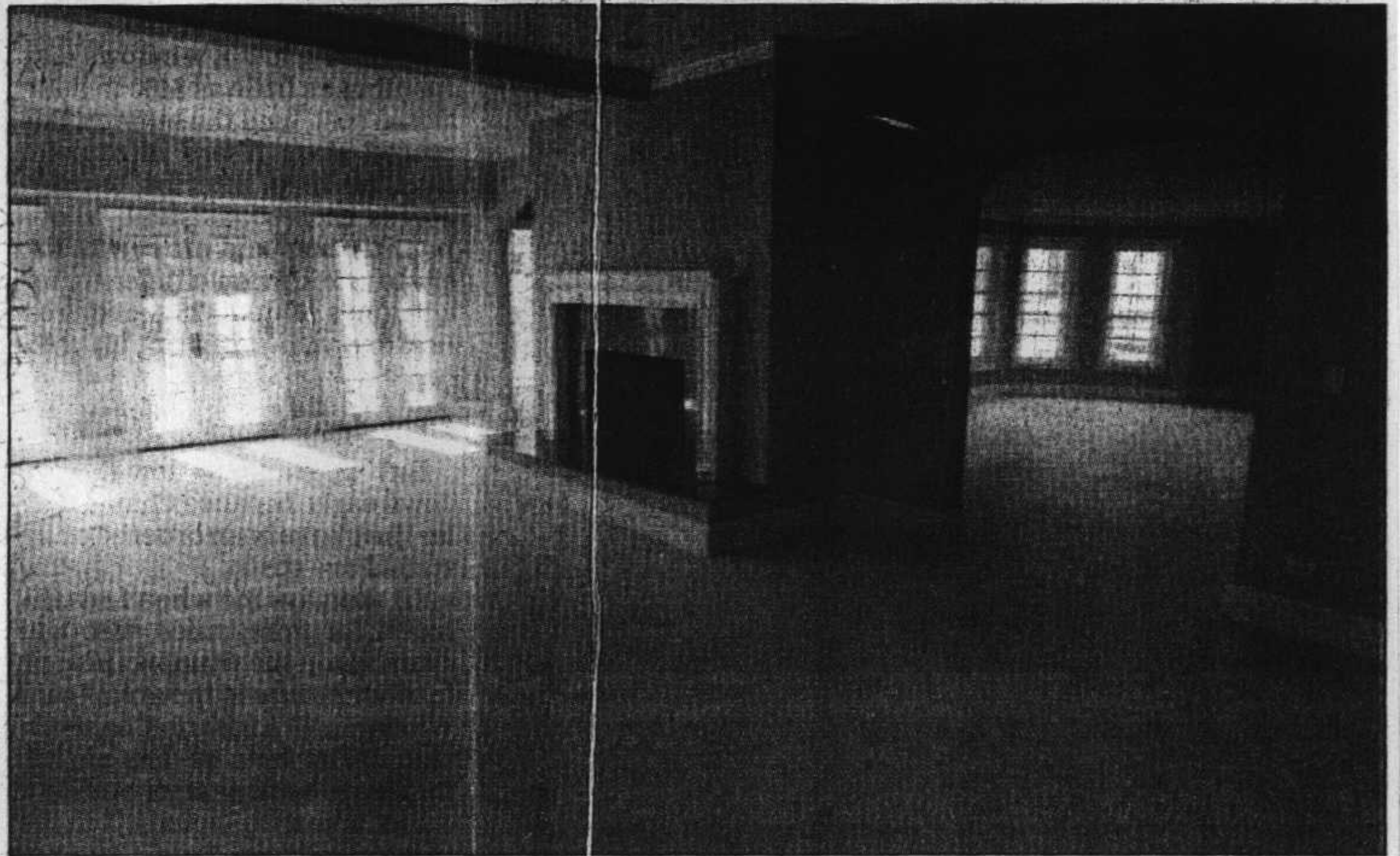


Photo for the Tribune by Michael Walker

Decisions about the size and depth of the basement will affect a home buyer for years to come.

"walk-out" basements.

"With a walk-out basement, you have a door where you can actually walk outside," said Curtis Perlman, project manager with Empeco Custom Builders. "An English basement has a close to full-size window, but there is no way to get outside from there."

These types of basements are attractive because they offer the potential for more natural light to filter in.

Home buyers often add windows to bring in light and give the space more character. They also add patios and terraces to take advantage of the terrain and create inviting gardens outside the basement area.

Another option to consider is a deeper basement. While an 8-foot ceiling height is standard in many developments, some builders will dig down an extra foot or two to help create a deeper space.

An extra foot will help offset the 6 to 10 inches of space typically needed near the ceiling for mechanical systems. The result is a finished ceiling height of at least 8 feet.

The cost to dig an extra foot in the basement typically is \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the builder and size of the basement.

Regardless of the timetable for finishing the basement, there are structural options to consider now that will make the process easier and less costly.

Many builders will "rough-in" the plumbing for a bathroom in the basement. This process involves identifying where a powder room or full bathroom would be added and installing the pipes and connections for a toilet, vanity, shower or bathtub.

The connections are added before the concrete is poured for the floor. Otherwise, a contractor or homeowner would have to cut through the concrete floor to add the connections later.

The cost to rough-in plumbing for a bathroom is \$1,200 to \$1,500, depending on the builder and size of the home. The cost to do it after the home is built might be \$3,500.

Windows are another feature that is difficult to add later and can make a big difference in the way a basement feels. One way to avoid the dark, dingy basement scenario found in many older homes is to carve out three or four extra windows in key places.

This is particularly true in walk-out or English basements where the terrain allows for

much more natural light than possible in a typical basement.

"With a walk-out basement you have full windows and doors," said Lisa Loftus, a partner with Reserve One Homes, which is building Duck Lake Crossing in Fox Lake.

Homes in that development are designed around a terrain that allows for walk-out basements. Those lower levels have 9- to 10-foot ceiling heights and often are used for family rooms, Loftus said.

The cost to upgrade to a house on a lot with a walk-out basement is \$20,000 to \$25,000.

In other developments, the cost to add windows might be \$500 to \$750, depending on the size and type of window. At many Wiseman-Hughes developments the cost is about \$600 per window, Payonk said.

"To do it after the fact, you need an excavator and a cutter, and it might run three times the cost," she added.

Allison E. Beatty is a Chicago-area freelance writer. If you have questions or information to share regarding new home buyers' product and design choices, write to Choices c/o Chicago Tribune, New Homes Section, 435 N. Michigan Ave., 4th Floor, Chicago, IL 60611. Or, e-mail: [abeatty22@comcast.net](mailto:abeatty22@comcast.net)