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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Home & Garden

6 paint colors that make basements feel like real rooms

These designer-approved shades bring high style to lower levels.

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Benjamin Moore Decorator's White in a basement sitting area in Annapolis, Maryland. (Jenn Verrier)

By Kathryn O'Shea-Evans

Decorators face plenty of uphill battles, but one of the trickiest spaces to work with is actually downhill: the basement. How do you make a subterranean space that's often associated with root cellars and lava-lamp-lit shindigs feel like something other than a dank dumping ground for Goodwill-bound castoffs?

“Listen, most basements tend to have lower ceilings and an ooky, musty vibe,” says Tracy Morris, a designer in McLean, Virginia. But Morris and other designers have found that the right paint color — whether it’s an airy shade or an inky tone — can help make the space feel much more livable.

“Generally, everyone is so afraid to go dark in basements, especially in basements that have little or no natural light,” says Jeanne Barber, owner of Camden Grace Interiors in West Hartford, Connecticut. “But I am a fan of leaning into the moodiness and going dark because it creates a more enveloping feeling … especially if a basement is going to be used in the evening for drinks or lounging or games.”

Peter Miles, principal architect of the Drawing Board in Annapolis, says that color-drenching, or painting all the surfaces in the room (including the ceiling) the same color, can also impart a cozy feel. Designer Liz Potarazu, of LP & Co in Potomac, Maryland, said in an email that the approach is particularly effective in low-ceilinged rooms because it “doesn’t delineate a difference between wall and ceiling, which naturally draws the eye up and makes the room appear more spacious.”

Just be sure to test your chosen basement paint color before you commit, especially because the can lighting typically used in subterranean spaces can greatly impact a hue. “Something that looks one way in natural light when you’re looking at the paint swatch upstairs can read really differently” in the basement, Barber says.

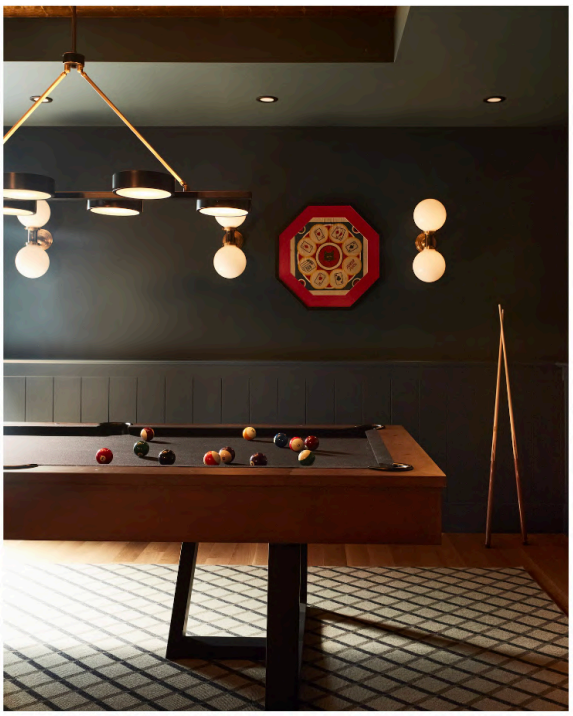
Here, designers share six above-grade paint colors for below-grade spaces.

Benjamin Moore Decorator’s White

Decorator’s White. (Benjamin Moore)

Using the same color everywhere “can go a long way towards making spaces feel bigger, even if you don’t have a ton of natural light,” Miles says. In one subterranean lair, which includes a guest room as well as a family hangout space, he used Benjamin Moore’s Decorator’s White, “a warmer white,” to help make up for a general lack of sun. The finish is flat on the walls but glossier on the trim for a “very subtle contrast,” he says. “It makes the trim read as this slightly more expensive element, highlighting it in a very tasteful, subtle way.”

Farrow & Ball Hague Blue



Hague Blue has “slightly green undertones,” designer Jeanne Barber says. (Jared Kuzia)



Farrow & Ball’s Hague Blue. (Farrow & Ball)

For a family with teenage sons in Simsbury, Connecticut, Barber used Farrow & Ball’s Hague Blue to give the basement some instant swagger. “I really like that color because it has sort of some chalky, slightly green undertones,” she says. “A lot of times, navy blue can sometimes just look like a little boy’s room or very nautical … like that Pottery Barn 6-year-old boy’s room. Going with a navy blue that is a little bit more nuanced tends to elevate it.”

Benjamin Moore Edgecomb Gray



Benjamin Moore's Edgecomb Gray in a basement family room in Washington, D.C. (Greg Powers)

Edgecomb Gray. (Benjamin Moore)

Morris used Benjamin Moore's Edgecomb Gray for the basement walls in a Georgetown rowhouse owned by empty nesters. "It leans a little bit more on the traditional side because it has a little bit more beige than the average neutral, and it gives a really warm feeling overall," she says. "It's cozy." That's a sage move for a basement with a fireplace.

Benjamin Moore Newburyport Blue



Benjamin Moore's Newburyport Blue in a basement family room in Bethesda, Maryland. (Stacy Zarin Goldberg)



Newburyport Blue. (Benjamin Moore)

The navy undertones in Benjamin Moore's Newburyport Blue play well with the crisp white trim and ceiling in this window-starved basement. "Its saturated hue brings warmth and character to a space with very limited natural light," Mary Gordon, co-founder of Bethesda's InSite Builders & Remodeling, said in an email. And the color's richness highlights the homeowners' memorabilia, "transforming the basement into a space that feels inviting, distinctive and open rather than dim or cramped."

Sherwin-Williams Classic French Gray



A color scheme with the right shades of gray feels “imaginative and sophisticated,” designer DuVäl Reynolds says. (Markus Wilborn/MW Concepts)



Sherwin-Williams's Classic French Gray. (Sherwin-Williams)

Gray doesn’t have to mean builder-grade boring; the right shade can impart an almost cinematic tone. In this Leesburg, Virginia, home, trim in Sherwin-Williams Iron Ore and a ceiling in the brand’s Mindful Gray add equilibrium amid walls painted Classic French Gray. “We selected these paint colors to reflect our theme of Harry Potter meets Paul Revere — a balance of magical whimsy and historic character,” DuVäl Reynolds, owner of DuVäl Design in Fairfax, Virginia, said in an email. “By staying within the gray family, the palette nods to the moody, enchanted feel of Hogwarts while also evoking the timeless, classic tones of early American tradition. The result is a scheme that feels both imaginative and sophisticated.”

Farrow & Ball Railings



The paint color Railings imparts a cocktail lounge vibe. (Anice Hoachlander)



Farrow & Ball's Railings. (Farrow & Ball)

Wayne Adams, of BarnesVanze Architects in the District, used Farrow & Ball's Railings on the walls and woodwork of this basement, a collaboration with Coleman Riddell Interiors, to impart an ambiance that is decidedly more cocktail lounge than root cellar. "For basements, it's sometimes best to embrace the dark side and go bold," Adams said in an email.

Kathryn O'Shea-Evans is a design and travel writer in Colorado.