

Basements Gain Popularity In The Desert City

By Lloyd Lemons

Phoenix, Arizona with its topography ranging from dusty desert flatlands, to Indian inspired arroyos, to majestic mountains has never been a city with a lot of basements. In years past, desert dwellers typically had large lots with sprawling homes built on top of the desert floor. But as building lots got smaller and more expensive, basements offered the home buyer an opportunity to increase square footage without increasing the footprint size of the home. In other words, homes with expansive square footage could go up to a second floor, or down to a basement, rendering a large home on small lot. But more and more, Phoenix has homes being built in the mountains. What if the home owner wanted a basement home built on the slope of a mountain? That was the challenge recently handed to Searer, Robbins & Stephens, Inc., (SRS) a Phoenix architectural firm with years of design/build experience in the mountainous desert environment.

The Ahwatukee Foothills, an upscale community on the south side of Phoenix was the spot. The home would be a 4937 square foot, two-level residence, built on a small lot into the side of a mountain. The challenge was to put a basement under the home, and deliver to the owner an energy efficient, low maintenance residence that met the lifestyle demands of the family, while having a minimal impact on the desert environment -- all while keeping the price to no more than \$450 thousand dollars.

A ram-hoe and backhoe were used to dig through the rocky surface. The sloping topography called for a design that would terrace the house down the site. This arrangement also minimized the amount of rock that would have to be removed, and subsequent environmental damage.

The owners wanted a home to reflect their casual lifestyle, yet be easy to maintain and energy efficient. Looking down the mountain, from a perch above the structure, one sees mostly the roof of the
(File: sampsrbasement)

home (because of the way it's tucked into the building site) which when completed will be covered with durable, energy efficient flat concrete tile. The main level of the home is framed on top of a concrete block basement, which is completely hidden underground in the rear elevation, but has window exposure in the front, offering a basement with natural light. The patio in the rear of the home has a feeling of protected seclusion, created by a terraced effect using block walls which were carefully integrated into the steep upward slope of the mountain. Most of the windows are double pane insulated glass in aluminum frames. Windows in the living and dining rooms are butt-glazed (having no frame) for a clear, unobstructed view of the Foothills scenery. The exposed portion of the basement walls will be covered with flagstone, while the framed part of the house will be stucco. The hot Phoenix sun will provide solar hot water, and space heating in the home during the winter months.

Inside the residents will have a state-of-the-art entertainment center including a 12 foot video wall, a six foot television screen using the new HDTV format, and connectivity for computers, cable TV and telephone.

This home, designed by Searer, Robbins & Stephens, will soon be an eloquent addition to the Ahwatukee community. It is a beautiful yet unobtrusive design built into a natural desert setting in an area where residents have a deep affection for Mother Nature.

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(Photos enclosed.)

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