



Some luxury garages double as social man cave spaces.
 Photo: Tyler Development Corp.

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Garages: A New Profit Center for K&B Pros

Kitchen and bath designers may find that their talents for organization and ability to personalize spaces using just the right cabinetry, lighting, etc. translates well to designing upscale garage environments as an added profit center.

AUTHORS [Jamie Gold](#)

If you've been designing kitchens for a while, it's likely that at least one of your clients has asked you to install his or her old cabinets in the garage. If you manufacture stock cabinets, it's likely, too, that some of those cabinets were made by your company. What neither of you might have realized is that there's a tremendous opportunity to make real profits by putting new cabinets – plus lighting, flooring and other interior-grade amenities – in your clients' garages. It's happening right now, just maybe not yet in your company.

THE SCOPE

It has certainly happened for Chad Haas in his firm. Haas calls himself Chief Gearhead of Beaverton, OR-based [VAULT®](#), which manufactures premium cabinetry and other products for higher-end garages. He is also the 13-year-old company's founder. "In response to an industry that lacked innovation, I acted, conceiving a line of cabinets to be timeless and beautiful and, more importantly, built so durable that they would last a lifetime."

His cabinets have made their way to Dubai and Australia, as well as across North America and the Caribbean. His clients are homeowners and architects, builders and car enthusiasts. “We are learning that our customers want more than just to organize,” Haas says. “Their vision is for the garage to be an extension of their home, and to be furnished similarly to every other room. Instead of oil-stained floors and a mishmash of shelves, cabinets and hooks that don’t fit, they want to re-imagine their garages to be attractive, clean and organized. In response, we expanded to either find them exactly what they want or to create custom solutions to help them re-imagine their garage to discover its hidden potential and get more out of their homes.” Isn’t that what you already do on the other side of the door?

Moorea Hoffman, an Orange County, CA-based designer, author and NKBA speaker has been asked by her [Kitcheneering](#) clients to help them with their garage spaces, too. These are most often smaller projects, she shares, designed to improve a home’s storage. But it has provided added revenue for her firm and an added benefit for homeowners. “One client wanted a bit of a mudroom feature. We used aqua paint to brighten the wall and inexpensive white furniture and cabinets to create organization for shoes, backpacks and sports equipment. She said every time she pulls into the garage, she’s grateful for the improvement.” Hoffman has also added task lights above work stations and put cushioned floor pads there for client comfort. “Any space can be a revenue opportunity. The most important skill – much like for kitchens – is listening carefully to your clients’ description of how they really live.”

[Snaidero USA](#)’s showrooms have seen clients make a bigger investment, shares Alberto Snaidero, the company’s operational manager. What the Los Angeles County-based division of the Italian brand’s clients is seeking is design continuity: “It’s important to have a cohesive look in the interior of the house and reflect the customer’s taste.”

You’re probably used to this extending from kitchen to Great Room, but you may not have thought of style cohesion extending to your clients’ garages, too. You may also not have expected the kinds of interior accessories you’d install in a kitchen to make their way there, but homeowners are making the investment, Snaidero reports. “Cabinets with internal accessories are a must. Pull-out baskets can be provided for corner cabinet areas, and tall pantries [get] internal pullouts,” he adds. This is clearly a profitable departure from big box store open shelving.

For Tyler Udall, v.p. of Los Angeles-based luxury builder [Tyler Development Corp.](#), garages are just another premium space that his affluent custom home clients – many of whom are car collectors – expect in their projects. “Garages have become places where our owners hang out, and therefore spaces with finishes that equal those in the house.” They’re building in elements like sports bars, lounges and game tables, he shares. “It’s fun for them to spend time in the same space as their prized possessions.” As Udall notes, if a client is spending more than a million dollars on a classic car, its surroundings should be equally impressive.

These are not the Hoffman or even Snaidero clients who want stylish organization to greet them as they drive into their garages. These garage projects, Udall notes, “have definitely leaned toward the men making decisions, and they are designed more in a ‘man cave’ manner. Style cohesion does count, but ‘fun and unique’ elements are added into the mix,” he observes. One client wanted his cabinets to look like a vintage 1950s photo of a Bugatti mechanics’ garage. The builder’s custom cabinet vendor reproduced the look. Another client went for a glass floor in the home theater above so he could enjoy the view of his Italian sports car in the space below. One garage project got hand-cut bricks pulled out of “the dig” in Boston and a radiant heating system.

Home automation systems that control the whole house from the garage, car wash systems, automobile turntables and lifts, vintage lighting pendants that evoke those in mechanic shops, and custom toolboxes are also popular for luxury garages. In general, “The floor and ceiling finishes are as impressive and expensive as the house’s,” Udall says.

THE OPPORTUNITY

In the U.S., where three-car garages are being built faster than one-bedroom apartments, the demand for these spaces to become more attractive and functional isn’t surprising. Garages take up a lot of room and the larger, non-collector garage trend is being driven in part by multi-generational households. More generations equals more people equals more stuff, much of which ends up in the garage. More stuff, of course, means the need for more storage systems. And that means more revenue potential for kitchen designers and manufacturers

Brandon Smith, founder of San Diego-based [DCoopMedia](#), follows design, automotive and luxury trends for his No.26 journals and branding strategies clientele. “These spaces are responsible for protecting a consumer’s second-most valuable asset. One could spend just as much, if not more, on a truly awesome garage as they do on their kitchen,” he points out. Despite that potential, there are very few specialists like VAULT®’s Chad Haas. “While there are a number of reasons for this, it boils down to the consumer’s perception that the garage is a piece of a much larger whole. The architect designed the garage because he designed the house. The cabinet showroom fitted the garage because she fitted the kitchen. In short, the garage is oftentimes bundled into the scope of work provided by another professional.”

That professional could be you, especially in providing revenue-enhancing cabinetry, flooring and lighting to the space. “To really drive it home, the garage is typically the domain of the male occupant,” Smith points out. “That makes it another way to get him excited about the project as a whole,” he suggests.

“While the kitchen designer is certainly well-equipped to handle the design of function-heavy garage spaces, it has been cabinet companies that have made greater strides in tackling the garage,” Smith comments. “Originally billed as cabinetry for organization and storage functions, companies like The Closet Factory and California Closets are either marketing their wares as solutions for garage environments or producing separate garage-specific lines.” These will work for some clients and projects, but probably not for the higher-end buyer.

VAULT®’s Haas compares the garage to the custom closet, outdoor kitchen and home entertainment segments. “These multi-billion dollar marketplaces did not even exist 20 years ago. But today they’ve become mainstream,” the luxury garage designer observes. “The clients who are furnishing their garages today represent a very small portion of the overall market size. The much larger market is made up of ‘latent’ consumers who did not even realize they wanted or needed a finished garage, because they have yet to realize what their garage could be as an organized, functional and inviting space.” He predicts that every garage built in the future will address flooring, lighting and organization. “The income opportunity for designers is capitalizing upon serving the nearly 32 million mass-affluent and affluent households in the U.S. who want things done for them, who have high net worth and discretionary purchasing power and want to take advantage of [an] expert to guide them through the decision-making process.”

THE LEARNING CURVE

Designing a garage is no more complicated than designing a closet and less demanding than designing a kitchen, Haas asserts. “If a designer is billing time to design a client’s closet, they could easily pivot to the garage to capture additional revenue. The number of affluent households is sufficiently large and represents a business opportunity for designers with little training.”

Don’t assume, though, that because you consistently create gorgeous, highly functional kitchens (or kitchen cabinetry), that you know everything it takes to do the same in the garage. As Hoffman and her cabinet vendors caution, “Extreme temperature variations could cause problems. My projects were all in Southern California so I had no problems with that, but it’s something to consider for those in other areas.”

If you're working on the premium collector spaces that Tyler Development builds, you're going to need to know a bit more. Smith suggests spending time in the pits and garages at working racetracks, visiting specialty vehicle trades (such as upholsterers and body shops), and monitoring the popular automotive editorial resources. Know your client, too, Smith recommends. Does he want a gallery for his collection; a workshop to work on his motorized toys; a man cave to shoot pool, drink beer and socialize next to his roadsters; a time machine with vintage details; or a modernist space that blends seamlessly into the home? The design and functional elements you'll need to familiarize yourself with will depend on the garage character your client desires.

LAST WORDS

That is not so different from the varying demands of the client who bakes versus the client who juices versus the client who regularly entertains with caterers. You may just find yourself working around Lamborghinis, rather than La Cornues, to cater to the garage client. ■

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