

Designing a Great Garage

If you want a garage that's both good-looking and hard-working, consider these six points

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Garages require considerable space and often serve many functions, yet they frequently get little attention when people are planning a custom home.

That's too bad, for a well-designed garage can not only enhance the look of a new home, it can provide hard-working space for cars, storage, extra living space and more. To ensure your garage meets all your needs, take the time to plan it thoroughly and consider these six issues.

Location

The relationship of your garage to your home is critical. While it is logical to relate your garage to the driveway, locating the garage so it faces forward often compromises the appearance of your home. Instead, if your building site is large enough, consider orienting your garage perpendicular to the front of your home. This disguises the garage a bit and from the front of your property creates the appearance of a larger home.

On sloping sites, you may be able to make the garage part of your basement. While this reduces costs and makes use of what might be underutilized space in the basement, it can make site grading challenging. Also, it means you'll have to climb stairs—with groceries and other

personal belongings—every time you enter the house. If you are like me, constantly leaving and coming home with arms full of stuff, you may want to reflect on this.

I believe, in general, the ideal place for a garage is at one end of the home, with easy access through a mudroom to the kitchen area. You can add a half bathroom to the mudroom so someone working in the garage or kids playing outside don't have to tramp through the house. Also, it's good to provide a door at the back of the garage for easy access to the rear yard.

Type of Garage

Once you've decided on the location of your garage, you can consider whether you need a fully enclosed garage, a partially enclosed carport or a stand-alone structure. This decision may be driven by budget. Full garages require significant volume and add substantial cost to a home. Be sure to investigate various construction methods. If you want your garage to be built from full logs, you'll find that with many building systems, the logs need to be a minimum length for stability and to avoid unwanted splitting. This means that the distance between garage doors may need to be substantial (often more than 3 feet).

Of course another option is to build your garage or carport from traditional studs and just cover it with log siding. For aesthetic reasons this is not a first choice but it is important to know there are options. For tighter budgets, a stand-alone post and beam carport can be very attractive and reasonably priced.

Size and Uses

The size of your garage will influence construction costs, too. There was a time when you didn't determine the size of a garage by looking at the number of cars you owned. If you had one car, you had a 10-by-20-foot garage or 200 square feet of space. If you had two cars, one stayed in the driveway. Nowadays, people typically want one space for each car so three or more bays are not uncommon.

A garage is often intended for more than cars. You may wish to store boats, snowmobiles, lawn tractors and other machines. And you'll likely end up stashing many other things that just don't have a place in the house. To make sure your garage can handle all these needs, create an inventory of everything you own or will likely own that could end up in the garage. This list might include sports equipment, bicycles, gardening and construction tools, building materials and outdoor equipment.

Whatever the size of your list, it is generally prudent to include generous storage areas within your garage. They might be along the sides and end of your garage, meaning you'd want to plan on vehicle bays around 14 by 24 feet. Or you may prefer to create an entire section of the garage devoted to non-vehicular storage.

Also consider the best way to store each item on your list. In some cases you may need to figure on both short-term and long-term storage. For example, you may want to temporarily store bicycles during seasons when you use them, as well as provide a place for long-term storage during the winter. And you may want to design a variety of storage methods including cupboards, racks and bins, as well as a means of hanging tools and other articles from the walls and ceiling.

Also consider how you'd like to use the space above your garage. It could be home to a guest bedroom or a rec room for kids. If you're thinking about creating a suite upstairs and want a separate entrance, pay particular attention to access, including the number of stairs (the staircase will need to be taller than in a normal room) and approach. Also make sure you plan for heating and air conditioning ducts that will need to run in the ceiling.

Doors

Of course, you'll want wide access doors for your cars. The most common type is overhead doors and these come in a variety of sizes. There is no simple way of deciding whether to use a single large door or individual ones for each bay. If you want single doors just choose a width that makes it easy to back out your cars—your insurance adjuster will thank you later. If you usually have racks and sports equipment on top of your vehicle, it makes sense to add an extra foot of height to the garage and your bay openings. And remember the overhead tracks for the door requires some height, too. I recommend 9 1/2 feet minimum for a garage ceiling height, although higher may be preferable. If possible, run any required structural beams parallel to your parking spots. This reduces obstructions.

At the rear of the garage, consider installing a wide door or even a small overhead door to make it easier to move big things, like a riding lawn mower, to the backyard.

Mechanical Systems

Should you heat your garage? This will depend on your climate. While cold climates suggest heated garages, remember your vehicle will rust more quickly if the ice and snow on its

surfaces melts. If you choose to heat your garage you can opt for forced air from above, in-slab radiant heat or ceiling radiant heat.

Consider your other mechanical and electrical needs, too. Do you want to install a work sink and faucet so you can clean up after working on the car or digging in the garden? And if you do, should you weatherproof the pipes? Codes in some cold regions require plumbing in garages to be heat-taped, even if your garage is heated, to avoid freezing in the event your door is accidentally left open.

With regard to electrical issues, plan adequate lighting for tasks and adequate receptacles. If you will be installing a workbench, make sure the receptacles are placed at appropriate height and provide adequate voltage and circuits for your power tools.

Security

A good garage plan will also take security requirements into consideration. Given the increased wall height in garages, I often place garage windows higher than normal so you can get the benefit of natural light without allowing outsiders to look in.

Make sure your garage floor has adequate slope too, preferably to a floor drain so rain and melted snow won't puddle and create slippery spots. A trench drain in front of the doors may also be necessary. Be sure to seal the concrete floor so oil, gas and grease don't penetrate. You'll also want the garage itself to be sealed off from the living areas of your home. This includes adequate fire and noise separation for the walls, ceiling and doors, as well as a weather-stripped door into your home with an automatic closer.

As you can see, a garage is much more than a place to park cars. It requires the careful consideration you give to the remainder of your home.

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