

These Home Garages Sat Idle Before Covid. Now They're Gyms, Art Studios and Even Pubs.

The pandemic inspired homeowners to repurpose their seldom-used garages

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For two decades, financial adviser Tom West spent his free time painting in the basement of his Maryland home, next to the furnace and the washer and dryer. For almost as long, he dreamed of turning his property's detached two-car garage, seldom used for parking, into an art studio.

Then Covid hit, and Mr. West had far more time to paint and to finally start the project. He and his wife, Ann, spent about \$150,000 to transform the dilapidated garage into a light-filled art studio with a 14-foot cathedral ceiling to allow room for Mr. West's large-scale, abstract oil paintings. The project was completed in June.

"Since I started painting in natural light, I realized how deprived I was in my old space," said Mr. West, 64. "I was starting to see colors I had not realized were as brilliant as they were."

Cooped up during the pandemic, many homeowners transformed their garages into spaces that have nothing to do with cars—from home offices and gyms to ceramics workshops. Some of these conversions grew out of a necessity to add living quarters or to safely entertain friends and family, but others emerged from flights of fancy.

"People are getting creative with their space," said California Closets designer Justee Lundquist.

Until the pandemic, Ms. Lundquist said she had never worked on repurposing a garage, but since Covid she has had about 10 requests to turn garages into home offices, man caves and more. "The garage is an open area where they can let their imaginations go wild," she said.



Dennis Klaeser, an avid cyclist, converted one of the two garages on his property to a bike lounge, where he can store his bikes and entertain friends.

PHOTO: EVAN JENKINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Many Americans have garage space [they don't use for cars](#), said UCLA urban-planning professor Donald Shoup. The excess stems from off-street parking requirements first instituted in the 1930s, he said, with cities requiring two, three or even four parking spaces for each home. Present-day cars, Mr. Shoup added, are far more durable than they were in the past and don't need to be stored indoors, especially in warm climates.

In California, “no one parks their car in the garage,” said Caitlin Bigelow, co-founder of Maxable, a company that specializes in accessory dwelling units, or ADUs. “Everyone is using their garage for storage. People park in the driveway or on the street.”

Many cities are now eliminating off-street parking requirements out of concern for affordable housing and the environment, Mr. Shoup said. In 2017, California dropped its requirement that homeowners converting their garages into ADUs have two covered parking spaces.

The number of garage conversions accelerated during lockdown, when stir-crazy homeowners started to make changes. “It was something that kind of exploded,” Ms. Bigelow said, “with people saying, ‘I want more space on my property.’ ”

Josh and Juliet Friedman had never used their three-car garage for cars in the two years since they moved into their house in Orange County, Calif., parking in the driveway instead. So when preschool closed down during the pandemic, they decided to convert the garage into a classroom for their 3- and 5-year-old sons. They hired California Closets, working with Ms. Lundquist, to outfit the space with white and gray cabinets, shelving and other storage spaces, including locker-style cubbies. Then they added kid-size tables and chairs, bookshelves, and bins for toys and Legos. “We tried to emulate the preschool,” said Mr. Friedman, 41.

Another section of the garage was turned into a gym, with a Peloton bike and treadmill, a yoga area, a pull-up bar and a television.

“I love it,” said Ms. Friedman, who calls herself a Peloton addict. “I’m never going back to a gym.” Finally, Mr. Friedman, a videographer, has a workbench with charging stations for his drones and cameras. The total cost of the project was roughly \$25,000, Mr. Friedman said.

In addition to rarely using their Bethesda garage for parking, the Wests had never liked the look of the circa-1960s structure. “The building had this horrible metal siding on it,” said Mr. West. “I’ve wanted to get rid of that for 20-some years.”

They hired a friend, Stephen Gordon of InSite Builders & Remodeling, to tackle the conversion. InSite removed the siding and added large windows and sliding glass doors for abundant natural light, Mr. Gordon said. A low-heat LED lighting system has small but powerful light fixtures strung on a metal cable.

Two walls are covered with a fiberboard called homasote, so Mr. West can tack his canvases directly onto the wall while he is painting.

“The whole look of the building is much more contemporary,” said Mr. West, who plans to host art shows and cocktail parties in the space.

Bored during Covid, Rich Joyce decided to put a television in his Natick, Mass., garage for a no-frills hang-out spot. Before he knew it, he had spent about \$5,000 to convert the garage into a pub, with a 4-foot wooden bar, a pinball machine and a sign dubbing it “Joycee’s Bar & Grill.” Now every Friday

night his friends gather in the space, where custom-made Joyce's coasters read: "Home Is Where the Bar Is."

"Once we got going and there was nothing else to do, it took on a life of its own," Mr. Joyce, 47, said of the project. "When you get time on your hands, it makes you a little more creative."

Before Covid, he and his wife, Jennifer, had never used their garage for parking because their driveway can easily fit four cars. "It was a place to throw stuff," he said of the space.

Mr. Joyce did nearly all the work himself. He built a subfloor over the cement and laid down laminate flooring. The garage had "one lightbulb with a pull string," he said, so an electrician friend rewired the space to accommodate two refrigerators, a television and ceiling fan, plus baseboard heating.

He added a panel of windows to the garage door for more ventilation and light, and cut a new door in the side of the building. The walls are clad in cedar paneling Mr. Joyce had left over from another project, interspersed with barn board for a decorative look. As the work progressed, friends contributed signs and other memorabilia for decoration; a neighbor gave him the pinball machine. "Around town, everybody knows about Joyce's," he said.

Once completed, the space lent itself to Covid socializing because the garage door can be opened for plenty of air circulation, Mr. Joyce said. "It gave us an area where we could all hang out, and still see people," he said.

No money is exchanged at Joyce's, and visitors are encouraged to bring along a beverage to share. Mr. Joyce hosts events there, such as a friend's 50th birthday, and made Joyce's T-shirts to sell. He may even expand Joyce's in the future.

The Glenview, Ill., home that Dennis and Kathleen Klaeser bought three years ago had two garages, one of which they never used for cars.

"It was just sitting there as an extra storage space, completely underutilized," Mr. Klaeser said. An avid cyclist, Mr. Klaeser wanted to turn it into a bike lounge, where he could store his bikes and hang out with friends after rides.

Dennis and Kathleen Klaeser converted a garage into a bike lounge with a fireplace.

Evan Jenkins for the Wall Street Journal



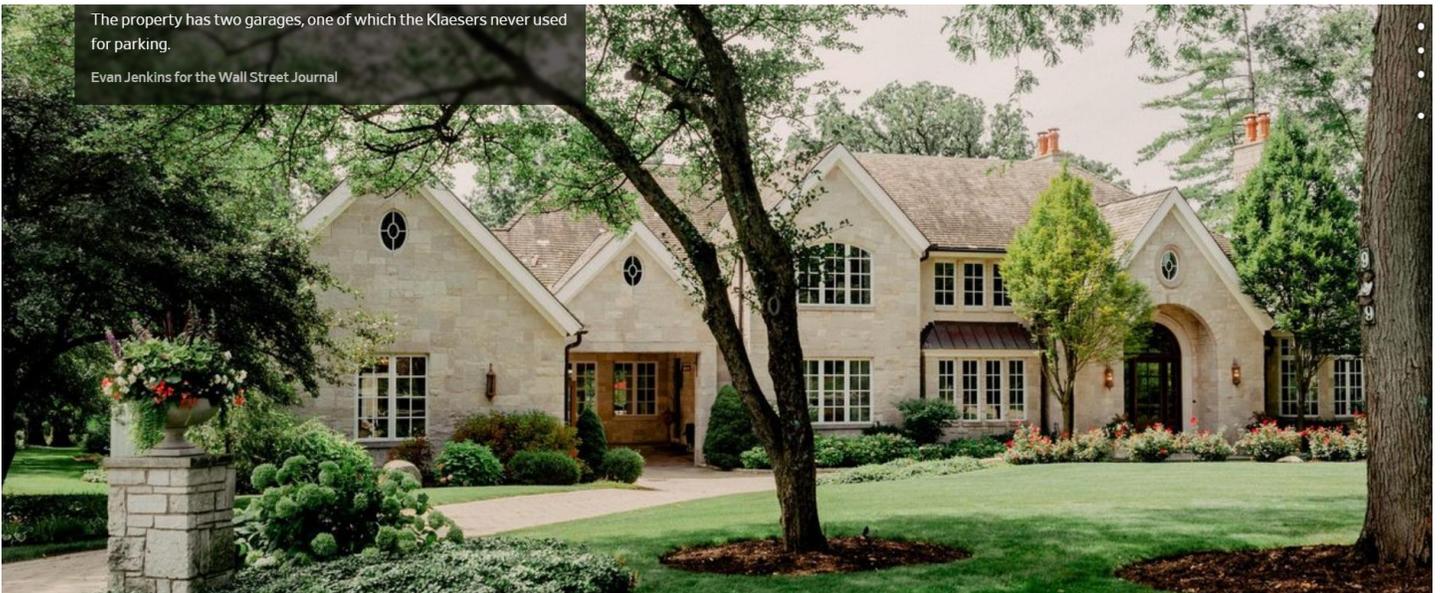
The Klaesers at their home in Glenview, Ill.

Evan Jenkins for the Wall Street Journal



The property has two garages, one of which the Klaesers never used for parking.

Evan Jenkins for the Wall Street Journal



The couple hired Morgante Wilson Architects to help them revamp the space. First, they removed the traditional garage door and replaced it with custom doors that swing open. Then they added a gas fireplace. “The fireplace completely transforms the space, so it no longer looks like a garage,” said Mr. Klaeser, 63, a retired banker.

Aiming for an industrial look, Morgante Wilson installed ceiling beams made from wood reclaimed from an old barn in Wisconsin. They covered two of the interior walls with a brick veneer and the concrete floors with luxury vinyl tile, which gives the appearance of wood but could support a car if necessary. Mismatched furniture and rugs were selected to evoke a clubhouse feel, said Morgante Wilson co-founder Elissa Morgante.

“It looks like he collected this stuff over time,” she said. A bright red Smeg refrigerator stores water, beer and wine.



Mr. Klaeser in the bike lounge. The walls were specially reinforced for bike storage. PHOTOS: EVAN JENKINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(3)

The Klaesers’ canoe hangs from the ceiling. Because bike storage was an important function of the space, the walls were specially reinforced to hold bike racks. Mr. Klaeser, who bikes about 100 miles a week, stores his five bicycles, as well as the tandem bike the couple bought “so my wife could keep up with me while we’re biking,” he quipped.

The lounge also has some bikes displayed on the wall as decorative pieces. A dandelion-yellow bike was handmade by the famed framebuilder Dario Pegoretti. A blue one is a refurbished road bike that belonged to Mr. Klaeser’s late father.

The total cost of the project was roughly \$40,000, Mr. Klaeser said.



Dennis and Kathleen Klaeser in the bike lounge.

PHOTO: EVAN JENKINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The pair had come up with the idea before the pandemic, but the work didn't start until the summer of 2020. Once it was completed in December, "that's when we realized it had a lot more function than we had thought."

On cold winter days, they can entertain in the bike lounge with the doors and windows open, warmed by the fireplace and hot drinks. "It worked very well during Covid," Mr. Klaeser said. "We could host friends and feel as though we had the openness of an outdoor space but a little protection from the weather."

Ms. Morgante said her firm has been busy adding amenities to houses as people make space for new hobbies or look to make their homes more comfortable. With no end to the pandemic in sight, she said, "I think we're all just adjusting to the new normal of what this might look like."