

The new must-have — garages as showrooms and even art galleries

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A high-specification garage has become as important as, if not more important than, the usual accoutrements of luxury living such as a Miele kitchen, Crestron automation system and Kinesis machine in the home gym. And if the word garage conquers up images of oily cloths and spanners, think again — these come with underfloor heating, marble panelling, bespoke lighting and remote-controlled turntables.

As ever this is a trend which began in the United States. Gavin Brodin, the creative director of Domus London, based in Beverly Hills, California, says: “Clients are looking for somewhere to display their collections, even if that is just three or four cars. These are different from their everyday cars, which are parked separately. These are display garages, like a showroom or art gallery.”

The garage at The Old Rectory, Hinton Blewett, comes with underfloor heating and a dehumidifying system

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Brodin describes lower-ground entertainment rooms separated from the garage by glass walls, behind which the cars are picked out with spotlighting, with favoured cars rotating very slowly on a turntable — motor disco style. More practically, Brodin says he has installed automated LED lighting that guides cars to specific parking places and turning circles with heated floor areas and drains, so that cars can be valeted easily.

The floors are tasteful terrazzo with marble trims, the walls tiled or leather-clad. “They feel like proper showrooms,” he adds. So much so, that one client is installing art behind a glass partition so thatg he can admire his collection as he goes to park.

Wealthy homeowners in Britain are catching up fast. Paul Finnegan, a director of Savills country department, says that last year he sold a house on the St George’s Hill estate in Surrey, in which the developer had installed a reinforced-glass floor in the study, so that the owner could admire his car collection in the garage below.

None of which is a far cry from the fantasy garage created by Eric Carlson, an architect with the Paris-based firm Carbondale, for the *South China Morning Post*’s *Style* magazine this month. The garage weaves a figure of eight around the house. Surrounded by glass walls and floors, the cars are visible from all over the house, and from the bottom of the swimming pool.

The prospect of a James Bond-style garage is not just for those with country pads and plenty of land. Jacob Sullivan, head of sales at Berkeley Homes in southeast London, explains that the developer employed the architects and designers Conran & Partners to undertake a £1 million fit-out of the garage at the One Tower Bridge development. “We thought that, with our focus on high specifications and high-quality materials, we had to be consistent and create something special here that fitted with the rest of the scheme.”

The result is travertine marble panelling on the walls and a ceiling dressed with metal and lighting to simulate the grille of a sports car. The 150 parking places, some of which are on sophisticated car-stacker systems, are on sale only to purchasers of the homes, for £150,000 each. Thirty-four of the 174 homes in the development remain on sale, priced from £1.275 million to £15 million,

Finnegan says: “The leading developers are keen to differentiate their homes and the garage is an important way to do it.” Savills is selling West Park, a newly built mansion in nearly four acres of woodland on the Wentworth estate in Surrey, for £15.95 million. As well as a games room, cinema, gym and pool, it has a noteworthy garage. “It looks like a normal detached garage but, when you open the doors, you see a car lift, which takes you down to a huge underground car park with parking for about a dozen cars,” he says.

Meanwhile, Finnegan has another newly built house, Saddle Stones, on the market for £9.5 million on the St George’s Hill estate. This one boasts a turntable in front of the triple garage – to save you having to master those pesky three-point turns. “It is unusual to have one of these here and it makes the house memorable when you are taking clients on a viewing tour,” says Finnegan. It is not only new-build homes that come with huge garages. Savills has two country homes – The Old Rectory in Hinton Blewett, Somerset (£2.5 million), and Blae Grove House in Up Nately, Hampshire (£3 million) – both of which have car “showrooms”.

In inner London, the presence of a garage can make or break a house sale. Karen Goodin, a partner at Heaton & Partners search consultancy, says: “A garage is massively important at the top end of the market. These buyers are not happy to leave their Astons, Bentleys, etc, on the road. People are paying vast amounts. There was an off-street parking space in Hyde Park Gardens which was on the market for £300,000 last year and certainly sold for near enough that amount.”

James Gubbins, from the Carter Jonas Mayfair office, says that the spate of developments in his area — including, somewhat ironically, the mobile phone tycoon John Caudwell's £155 million plan to transform a multistorey car park in Mayfair into a luxury apartment block — could send demand, and prices, for parking places to record highs. Gubbins has a parking bay near by, which would fit one large or two smaller cars. It is on sale at £375,000. He also has a £1.95 million flat that comes, unusually, with four parking spaces, each of which costs £50,000.

Chris Coleman-Smith, head of Savills' auctions, says that there is always demand for garages: "Garages are another type of property that has proved popular with property investors. While they've already made headlines for achieving incredibly high prices in prime central London, garages still offer good potential returns. At our last auction [May 11] garages sold above the reserve price in Brondesbury Park and Croydon. In Brondesbury, the reserve was £80,000 and it sold for £286,000, and in Croydon the reserve was £50,000 and it sold for £163,000. I wish I had more garages to auction, they always attract lots of attention."

Coleman-Smith says that while some garages are sold to developers to be turned into homes, many are retained as garages. Often these have potential for renting — especially if they are near popular commuting stations — or increasingly as storage facilities, in which to hoard the clutter overflowing from our homes.