

Custom home building takes luxury to new heights

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Custom homes, by definition, are one-of-a-kind luxuries. But even though their features are designed to meet the specific wants and needs of each customer, certain trends emerge in the market.

According to the results of a consumer survey entitled "What 21st Century Home Buyers Want" conducted by the National Association of Home Builders, new home buyers are looking for ever-bigger homes and increasing amounts of space inside, especially large kitchens that flow seamlessly into adjacent family rooms. Nearly 40 percent of survey respondents said they wanted a minimum of four bedrooms in their new homes and 25 percent desired a three-car garage.

Interior features and finishes

High-end custom home interiors are where the creature comforts of the good life really come into play. From special touches like customized showers to exquisite cabinetry finishes, homeowners enjoy putting their personal stamp on every square foot of their sumptuous surroundings.

"We're seeing a lot of high-end custom millwork in the way of coffered ceilings, wainscoting and crown molding throughout the entire home," said Cary-based custom homebuilder Jeff Holz, co-owner of Verseman Development Co., in Cary. "Homeowners are paying much more attention to those kinds of interior details than they used to." **Uniquely personalized light fixtures are also sought-after items in custom homes.**

"If you aren't finding the kinds of fixtures you want in a catalog, you can just provide the dimensions you need and have one custom made," explained Patrick Coveny, president of ARCH Construction Management, Inc., in Hinsdale.

Cozy touches

An interesting and luxurious feature gaining popularity is what Holz calls the morning bar--a built-in version of the wet bar located within the confines of the master bedroom.

"If you wake up in the morning in your big, rambling, 5,000-square-foot house and don't want to wander all the way to the kitchen, you can enjoy a cup of coffee or a glass of juice right in your bedroom, thanks to the morning bar," he said.

For those who'd rather enjoy a glass of vino instead of a cup of coffee, wine storage spaces are taking root in many custom home basements.

"Wine cellars are big, and getting even bigger," Coveny said.

With built-in racks made of redwood and mahogany, complementary wall murals and stained glass, a well-constructed and stocked wine cellar is an in-demand feature for any oenophile worth his weight in grapes.

Many baby boomers are looking ahead to the future for ways to make their dream homes accessible in years to come.

"We're seeing more elevators in homes these days, and universal design aspects are becoming more mainstream, like permanent nightlights and lower switches," Coveny said. "For example, the same architects who make plumbing features are now designing matching grab bars. They almost look like fancy towel bars that go in the shower; they're really nice."

An oasis at home

Bathrooms have come a long way to become some of the most luxurious rooms in any custom home.

"Whirlpool tubs have been popular for years and are still popular, but lately, there is much more focus on showers," Holz said. "Custom home buyers want full-body sprays and customized showers with overhead rainfall features."

Steam baths are another item receiving lots of attention.

"People are becoming more accustomed to the idea of using steam for health," Coveny explained. "Steam baths can sometimes be more useful and convenient than whirlpool baths, which can take up a significant amount of time, not to mention drain the whole hot water heater."

The kitchen is yet another area of the home that easily lends itself to customization. For instance, luxury cabinet manufacturers like Wm Ohs are offering furniture-style cabinetry with a great level of detail in terms of moldings and finishes.

"There's a new mocha finish on the market that's being used to really accentuate the profile on cabinets," Holz said.

Many people enjoy spending time in the kitchen creating gourmet meals, thereby creating a demand for professional chef-grade ranges, appliances and cook-top arrangements. The National Association of Home Builders survey showed that buyers and builders of upscale homes often opt for top-quality materials and appliances. High ceilings, work islands and walk-in pantries were named the most-wanted features.

"Most custom kitchens now have at least one second sink location for cooking prep work," said Holz.

Surprisingly, some cooking is even leaving the kitchen and moving outside.

"Even through we're a northern state, outdoor kitchens are a feature people are adding to their homes," Coveny said. "Outdoor kitchen appliances are weather-rated so they can sit outside without corrosion."

The great outdoors

Outside the home, exteriors are getting a facelift.

"Buyers are using more stone accents than in the past," Holz said. "We used to see a lot of brick or cedar and brick combinations, but now we're seeing more stone with brick."

The quaint charms of front porches are back in a big way, and curb appeal remains a top consideration.

"Many people seem to be spending more money on exterior cultivation," Coveny added. "It adds more value to the square footage. If you spend a lot of money for the property, you want to make it look as attractive as possible."

The garage has become another area of focus for homeowners in recent years.

"People are using the space above their detached garages to create playrooms, guest quarters or home offices," Coveny said.

The modern well-dressed garage is likely to contain elaborate wall organizer systems with cabinetry and shelves, along with durable epoxy-coated floors.

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