

Trends, Ideas and Creative Techniques

Insight

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Changing public spaces in new homes

In the McMansion era of home building, bigger definitely seemed better, especially in the public spaces where family and friends gather. But while soaring foyers and family rooms looked good, they didn't work so well in terms of energy efficiency and practicality, as anyone who ever tried to change a light bulb 14 feet off the floor will tell you.

Today, those spaces are being redefined. According to a recent Wall Street Journal article, Pulte Homes, Toll Brothers and K. Hovnanian all reported that buyers are opting to replace cathedral ceilings with additional square footage on the second floor of the house. Pulte has seen a 70 percent jump in demand for such options among families with young children since 2006, according to the article. That additional space provides families with a host of functional options, including additional bedrooms, kid's hang-outs, more-convenient laundry rooms, more or larger bathrooms, or dual master suites.

"We don't need the cubic space we used to design," says Leigh Overland, a Connecticut-based architect who designed a Victorian-style "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" house. "In the typical 2,000-square-foot house, you can get a feeling of openness with south-facing glass; it makes it feel open and brings passive solar in."

The operative word today for the public areas of the home is "flexibility," says Cheryl O'Brien, president and lead designer of C. O'Brien Architects in Bala Cynwyd, Pa. The fewer rooms in a home, the more flexible the space can be.

This is in direct contrast to the notion of room count, which O'Brien describes as "houses with 2,000 to 2,200 square feet having a living room, dining room, kitchen, breakfast nook and family room where none of the rooms functioned well." Instead she prefers what she calls "sensible design: floor plans with a nice-sized kitchen; one gathering space for eating; a great room; and a flex room that can be used as a home office, a play room, an in-law suite, a formal dining room, or whatever function best fits the family's needs."



Photo Credit: Lanterra Homes



Photo Credit: Lanterra Homes

One reason for the shift away from several separate rooms, O'Brien says, are young buyers who don't want and can't afford to furnish all those rooms. "For people who are 30 years old, starting their families or single, I don't think the Ethan Allen dining room set is on their list of dreams," she says. "It's the big-screen TV or the laptop - the technology. The design of the house needs to reflect what those people really want."

Carlos Bazbaz, president of Houston-based Lanterra Homes, sells to those buyers. The biggest battle his company faced when it designed affordable, starter patio homes for first-time buyers was convincing them that 1,300 square feet was big enough to meet their needs. He did it by essentially making the public spaces of the house - the first floor - a kitchen and a flexible dining and living space. "It's good for entertaining, which is good for the younger crowd that is our market," he says. "There's lots of natural light and we have 9-foot ceilings on the first floor. That provides an open and large feel."

There are no foyers or corridors; those are wasted space that he put toward additional square footage in bedrooms, bathrooms and storage, Bazbaz says. "That's primarily our idea on the use of space," he says. "Every single corner, where there is dead space, we analyze it. You don't live in a foyer or a corridor."

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A great master suite should be the ultimate "me" space

Think about it - homeowners start and end their days in their bedrooms, making the master suite one of the most used and important features in a home. So, it makes sense to create as inviting a space as possible.

"We're in a fast-moving world," says Doris Pearlman, president of Possibilities for Design, a Denver-based interior design firm that merchandises model homes for builders nationwide. "There's been a lot of emphasis on getting away to a retreat, being able to regroup and get away from the hubbub of the day." She advises designers to take this into account when designing and decorating bedrooms and baths.



Photo credit: Possibilities for Design

One trend she sees in new homes is long master suites, which give designers room to incorporate features like a sitting area at the foot of the bed, perhaps with two chairs and an ottoman or a sofa and cocktail table. "Almost all of our current models have that kind of look," she says. "You're really picking up an extra room within the space."

No matter the square footage, it's important for a master suite to convey a sense of luxury, says Pearlman. People want the pampered feeling of a high-end hotel. You can use both design and décor to evoke that feeling. Architectural elements, such as chandeliers and trim, can add drama to the space, which can be reinforced with details such as sumptuous bedding.

Carlos Bazbaz, president of Houston-based Lanterra Homes, says his company uses a couple of techniques to make second-floor master suites feel larger in their model homes, including plenty of windows and coffered ceilings. Ceiling plates are 9 feet off of the floor deck, and the deepest part of the coffers is 11 feet high. "We also have a lot of natural light," Bazbaz says. "It helps make the rooms feel bigger, open and soft, which is very important. We made sure we didn't compromise in the master suite. It has to fit a king-sized bed and armoire."

That feeling of luxury should carry through from the bedroom to the bath. In fact, these two rooms should complement each other in color, architectural style and finishes. Bathrooms are "great places to show off fabulous finishes, such as faucetry," Pearlman says. "The options and upgrades for making that a luxury space are huge. You can make it feel like an indulgent space at any price point with accent tile, framed mirrors, and upgraded lighting and hardware."

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Upgraded shower fixtures, such as the Divine Vertical Spa Set from **Moen's ShowHouse Collection**, are an extremely popular way to create a retreat feeling in a master bath. Erica Gardner, president of Castle Rock, Colo.-based Garden Gray Interiors, says that showers are becoming "more spa-like with fancy steam jets. People are being very selective with the types of shower heads they choose. It's not just a shower anymore."

Another increasingly popular option for the master suite is two-sided fireplaces, such as the **Elite™ Series EBVST gas**-burning, B-vent fireplace from Lennox Hearth Products, that can be seen from both the bedroom and bath. Danbury, Conn.-based architect Leigh Overland says they're a frequent request from his clients. "The bathroom is the first space we see in the morning. It should be relaxing. It's a very important space."