

Inside the House of the Future

Christopher Palmeri

Green technology, wireless connectivity, and less ostentation are just some of the newest home-building trends.



National Association of Home Builders

When the homebuilding industry descends on Las Vegas on Jan. 20 for its annual trade show, a highlight as always will be a project called the New American Home. This model house—a new one gets built each year—serves as a showcase for the industry's latest technology and trends. The massive four-bedroom, five-bath structure popping up in suburban Las Vegas this year may seem a little out of touch with the times as the nation suffers through the worst housing slump in decades. But out in the real world, architects and builders are busy trying to figure out how to put some of the same design features into new homes. Such trends are worth noting: Having amenities that appeal to buyers a decade or more after your house is built will help it hold its value. We list below some of the most important new design features you'll see in homes.

Indoor/Outdoor Living Just since 1992 the number of U.S. homes built with patios or porches has doubled. The New American Home in Las Vegas has a giant backyard that features a covered area with a flatscreen TV and pool table as well as a detached "rejuvenation room" for relaxing. New homes in warmer climates are being built with courtyards that provide a connection to the outdoors but also give shelter from wind and privacy from neighbors. This is critical as builders try to cram larger houses onto smaller lots to keep land costs down. And there's a history to them, notes Newport Beach (Calif.) architect David Kosco: "The courtyard goes back to Roman times."

The Return of the Basement With lot sizes limited, builders are looking for space underground. Once a typical feature of homes in the Northeast, basements are rising in popularity nationally as a way to create extra space. New technologies in insulation and waterproofing are allowing builders to add basements in any climate. They can serve as game rooms for kids, home theaters, or just the "man-cave" for Dad. Builders are even creating underground garages for homes and townhouses to free up space for living areas above, notes Irvine (Calif.) architect Rick Emsiek.

The Death of the Living Room The kitchen, living, and dining areas are continuing to merge into a great room or family room. In a 2007 study conducted by the National Association of

Home Builders, half of those surveyed said they would do without a formal living room if it meant a larger family gathering space. In some cases this is a reflection of the connection to the outdoors as well, as home buyers want fewer walls and unobstructed views out into the backyard, says Craig Delahooke, director of custom development for John Laing Luxury Homes.

The Home Office No longer just a spare bedroom, the home office is evolving into an entirely separate structure such as a casita in the backyard or even a separate wing near the garage. Having a separate entrance for the home office allows today's increasingly mobile workforce to receive work-related visitors or hire an assistant at home without having these people traipse through the main house.

Wireless, but not Cordless With wireless laptops allowing people to carry their computer to any room, that little computer nook that was popping up at the top of the stairs in many new homes is starting to disappear. Instead you're likely to see a charging station or "Mom's Desk," a little space, typically in the kitchen, where cell phones, laptops, and other devices can be charged.

The Soft Loft The industrial look with concrete floors and exposed brick is over. Thousands of these pseudo SoHos popped up even in cities such as Dallas and Houston that lacked an industrial past. Downtown lofts have seen some of the steepest price declines in this bust. "Architects love to show these wide-open floor plans, but the reality is people want some privacy," says Los Angeles architect Jonathan Watts. He says new condos are returning to more traditional floor plans. Lofts are adding hardwood floors, sliding doors, even wall-to-wall carpeting to warm them up.

Say Bye to Bling As befits this economy, homes are getting less ostentatious. That means less ornate wood, stone, and iron work. No more grand entrances with curved-marbled staircases. The stairs are shifting to the side of the home and back to their utilitarian purpose. Even fireplaces are flickering. Only 46% of all new homes came with one in 2007, according to the U.S. Census. That's down from 59% in 1996.

The Green Badge of Honor It almost goes without saying, but green continues to be in, despite the latest slide in gas prices. Even the giant New American Home promises to use "net-zero energy" thanks to devices such as solar panels and designs that let in natural light. Home buyers used to love wowing their friends with the size of their McMansions. Now, says Sean Degen, vice-president for architectural services at home building giant Pulte Homes, "you're going to see more people having a green badge of an honor."

Aging in Place Builders say it's rarely something they overtly try to sell, but consumers are responding to features such as wider doors that can accommodate a wheelchair or walker, master bedrooms on the first floor, and tasteful looking handrails in the shower—amenities that will help baby boomers stay in their homes as they grow old.

Palmeri is a senior correspondent in BusinessWeek's Los Angeles bureau.

Business Week, New York, 6 jan. 2009, Lifestyle, online. Disponível em <www.businessweek.com>. Acesso em: 2 fev. 2009.