

WHAT HOMEBUYERS WANT MOST

FROM MATTE BLACK FINISHES TO PIZZA OVENS TO COMMUNITY GARDENS, HERE'S OUR LATEST LOOK AT WHAT BUYERS ARE CLAMORING FOR

By Katy Tomasulo

As trends go, some are fleeting, while others stick around for so long they can hardly be called trends anymore. That's the case with our latest look at the home and community features today's buyers are seeking. Many must-haves are familiar (think open floor plans and outdoor kitchens), while others, such as black finishes and voice-activated technology, are just emerging. We checked in with industry pros and analysts to identify 45 in-demand design elements, products, and features for today's homes.

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

1 **SMALLER.** According to the latest data from NAHB, home size may be leveling off: 2016 was the first year since 2011 that home size declined. The number of homes with four bedrooms and three-car garages also decreased. "We saw in 2016 the end of an era," says Rose Quint, the association's assistant VP for survey research. "[It was] the end of this steady period after the recession where we saw homes getting bigger and bigger year after year." The American Institute of Architects' 2017 Home Design Trends survey showed a similar decline in interest.

2 **OPEN.** Not surprisingly, "Open-plan living is no doubt here to stay," says Karl Champley, a master builder, home improvement expert, and Insider for the National Kitchen & Bath Association (NKBA). Clear sight lines and large great rooms combining the kitchen, family room, and dining area are one of the top home must-haves. When designing, "It's important to think about how we entertain and to create spaces that support the way we entertain," says Dawn Zuber, owner of Studio Z Architecture, in Plymouth, Mich., and past chair for the AIA's Custom Residential Architects Network (CRAN).



3 FLEXIBLE. Flex space to accommodate changing needs and family makeup is important to buyers, such as a home office conversion into a bedroom for an aging mother or a yoga studio that morphs into a nursery. Flexible floor plans and understanding each customer's needs are key in responding to this trend.

4 PERSONAL. Buyers once wanted to keep up with the Joneses, but today, personalization is increasingly important. "It doesn't matter what their neighbor is doing; everyone is making the home fit themselves," Champley says.

INTERIORS

5 MODERN-ISH. Transitional styles are coming on strong, offering homeowners an opportunity to veer more modern without being too edgy. In addition, according to NKBA's 2017 Design Trends Report, preference for contemporary has passed traditional for the first time.

6 EFFICIENT. Sustainability features are still niche in many regions, but energy efficiency is popular: Zillow's most recent Housing Trends Report found that nearly half of homebuyer respondents find energy efficiency desirable. Whether you're using Energy Star-rated windows, beefing up the building envelope, or being water-wise, share expected return on investment with your buyers.

7 LIGHT-FILLED. Improved energy efficiency and a desire for increased wellness are driving demand for more daylighting. "There's research that shows that humans need daylight," Zuber says. "It really has a big impact inside the building."



8 STORAGE. Americans are seeking to reduce clutter, so provide ample storage, including well-appointed closets, to ensure there's plenty of space to stash things out of sight. "People want to see their homes organized," Quint says. That includes the garage and laundry room.

9 SIMPLE. The home is increasingly a point of escape, and homeowners are seeking simplicity. This is particularly true for older buyers, says Gena Kirk, VP of KB Corporate Studio for Los Angeles-based KB Home. "They're looking to simplify. They had a house with ... all of the stuff, and now they're looking to get rid of all that. Very clean, very simple."

10 DRAMA. Lighting is moving from utility to design statement. "Before, lighting was meant to not disrupt. [It was] just functional," notes Alaina Money, owner of Garman Homes and Fresh Paint by Garman, in Durham, N.C. "Right now they're being used to their full extent to accessorize the home and to personalize the home."

11 TEXTURE. Accents, such as urban-inspired brick or trendy shiplap panels, indicate a trend toward walls with more texture.



Money says she is also seeing a blending of woods and metals on elements such as light fixtures.

12 WELLNESS. The trend toward natural personal care products is translating into wellness for the home. Buyers are paying closer attention to ingredients and likely will respond to the use of low-VOC



products. Biophilic elements, indoor-outdoor connections, and fresh air also play a role. “One thing people are very conscious of these days is natural ventilation,” Champley says.

13 SMART. There is an app for everything, and consumers desire the same inside their homes. Younger buyers expect smartphone control for tasks like turning on the lights, activating the security system, and controlling the temperature. Voice activation through tools such as Amazon Alexa and Google Home is also increasingly popular. “We do have great interest from the customer in smart devices that make it easier to live in the home, that make it more fun to live in the home,” says Jacob Atalla, VP of sustainability for KB Home. Still, too many options can be overwhelming. Get to know your buyers’ needs and preferences and offer options that can grow over time.

KITCHEN

14 ISLANDS. The kitchen continues to be the center of the home, and large kitchen islands are the hub around which daily life circulates. “[It’s] still the entertainment capital of the house,” Champley says.

15 OUTLETS. As the kitchen becomes the center for homework and life in general, make sure there are plenty of outlets and USB ports for charging phones, tablets, and laptops. This is especially necessary around the island.

16 PENDANTS. Island lighting is moving away from a few small pendants to one or two larger, statement-making fixtures.

17 PRO STYLE. The proliferation of cooking TV shows has home chefs seeking more appliances as well as specialty appliances. “Where before you would have a range, now you have four or five

different cooking appliances,” Zuber says, which may include warming drawers, steam, and convection.

18 BLACK. Similarly, though stainless steel continues its reign, some buyers are ready to move on to the next big thing in appliance finishes. Black matte, black stainless, and bronze-like finishes are some of the latest options that still offer a sleek, professional look.

19 TWO TONES. Two-tone cabinets were one of the top 10 kitchen trends in the NKBA’s annual design survey last year. Garman’s Money says this trend can be executed with contrasting upper and lower cabinets or with perimeter cabinets in one color and the island in another.

20 WARM WHITE. When it comes to cabinet hues, white is taking over, KB Home’s Kirk says, and warmer tones are now in demand more so than dark finishes. Warm grays with the wood-grain showing through also are popular, she notes.

21 QUARTZ. Demand for quartz countertops is steadily climbing. “People want that smooth, open, clean look that quartz gives them,” Kirk says.

22 STORAGE. With the desire to reduce counter clutter comes thoughtful and creative kitchen storage. “They’re thinking through the way they’re going to live when they’re in their kitchen and cooking,” Kirk explains. For example, drawers instead of doors offer easier access to pots and pans, vertical/slotted spaces wrangle cookie sheets and cutting boards, and designated spots for mixers and other appliances keep surfaces clear.

23 PET-CENTRIC. Homeowners increasingly see their pets as part of the family, and their homes should reflect that. Though pet-washing stations scored low on a recent NAHB survey about consumer wants, builders should consider details such as where to store giant bags of dog food and where food and water dishes can be placed out of the way. Renters want room for their furry friends, too, so consider designated pet areas and poop bag stations for multifamily buildings.

BATH

24 SLEEK. Though jetted tubs were once the “it” detail for master baths, time, water volume, and maintenance slowed demand. Instead, buyers are favoring large, luxurious showers, often with multiple showerheads, handshowers, and sprays. Curbless designs and linear drains are contributing to a streamlined look.

25 SOAKERS. An exception to the shower-rather-than-tub preference is the popularity of freestanding soaking tubs. As the master bath gets larger and more lavish, the freestanding tub plays the



17



20



22

PHOTOS: TOP AND RIGHT, EMILY ROSE IMAGES, STEVE KUZIMA PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY STUDIO Z ARCHITECTURE; BOTTOM, COURTESY GARMAN HOMES

role of art piece. New compact models are bringing the trend into smaller master bathrooms.

26 UNIVERSAL. Originally reluctant to embrace aging-in-place features, Baby Boomers are opening up to the idea of accessible products that help them stay in their homes longer, particularly options that don't look institutional. No-threshold showers, grab bars that look like towel bars, anti-slip flooring, lever handles, comfort-height toilets, and adequate lighting are among the simple features that make life safer and more comfortable for users of all ages. At minimum, builders should install blocking for future grab bars.

27 MATTE. After several years of polished chrome and satin nickel domination, fun new faucet finishes such as matte black

and brushed gold are emerging, as well as colors to add a bold pop to contrast with white surfaces. Increased functionality, such as hands-free or touch operation, is becoming more common.

28 BIG. Large-format floor tile continues to be popular for bathroom floors.

29 PATTERNS. In addition, Money and Kirk are seeing interest in patterned tile, such as old-world or Spanish, in master bathrooms, but updated for today's tastes.

30 WATER-WISE. With drought becoming more prevalent, water-conserving fixtures are a safe bet and, often, a must-have.

EXTERIORS

31 OUTDOORS. Demand for outdoor living features isn't slowing down, and buyers increasingly want the same amenities on their decks and patios that they have inside. This includes fully functioning kitchens and dedicated dining and seating areas.

32 INSIDE OUT. Blurred lines between in and out are a key part of the outdoor living trend, creating larger, flowing



25

entertainment spaces. Increasing availability of multi-panel doors and opening glass walls across a range of price points is putting such seamless transitions within reach for more buyers.

33 APPLIANCES. Along with grills, refrigerators, and wine coolers, specialty outdoor appliances such as pizza ovens and smokers are popping up.

34 NO-FUSS. Low-maintenance materials are a must for many consumers who don't want to spend all summer cleaning and painting. In the AIA's 2017 Home Design Trends Survey, 63 percent of architects report increasing popularity of low-maintenance products versus 59 percent the year before.

35 CURB APPEAL. Buyers want their homes to stand out, and mixing textures, colors, and materials is one way to do that. Think lap siding with vertical board-and-batten on the gable ends or dark trim or gutters contrasting against a white façade.

36 CONTRAST. Dark-toned window frames in bronze or black also achieve this striking contrast while lending a contemporary vibe.

37 STATEMENT. A boldly colored front door is a way for homebuyers to inject personality without making a huge commitment that could affect resale value.

38 CHARGE IT. If you're not including an electric vehicle charger in your homes (and multiple stalls in multifamily projects), it's time to start thinking about it. According to Forbes, sales of electric vehicles grew 32 percent annually from 2012 to 2016, and electric vehicles are expected to make up 65 percent of light-duty vehicle sales by 2050.



27

COMMUNITIES

39 AMENITIES. Replacing golf courses in new master planned communities are unique community amenities. "It's about food, recreation, socialization," says Ken Perlman, principal at John Burns Real Estate Consulting. "Those are the things people place high emphasis on right now." Though it varies by region, these features may include mountain bike trails, community gardens, on-site farms, and even bike and kayak rentals.

40 POOLS. In regions where swimming is a community staple, pools are getting decked out, such as with slides or adults-only lap pools, Money says.

41 MINGLING. Social amenities, from yoga sessions to cooking classes to book clubs, are increasingly popular. "It's about social interaction and community gathering spaces when you want them," Perlman says.



29



32

42 **SUBURBS.** The notion that Millennials don't want to live in the suburbs is proving to be a myth. "The suburban dream is alive and well," says Jeremy Wacksman, chief marketing officer for Zillow. "Millennials don't just want to live downtown. They are looking for their first house and want good schools and want to move to the suburbs."

HOMEBUYING

43 **OWNERSHIP.** Also proving to be a myth is that Millennials don't want to own houses; many are just delayed in making their purchase due to inventory and affordability. "We do know that Millennials want to buy homes," Quint says. "The large majority of young people are interested and still consider owning their own home

THE EXPERTS: Professional Builder tapped nine experts on must-have features: Jacob Atalla, VP of sustainability initiatives, KB Home; Karl Champley, master builder and NKBA Insider; Gena Kirk, VP of KB Corporate Studio, KB Home; Jessica Lautz, managing director of survey research, National Association of Realtors; Alaina Money, owner, Garman Homes and Fresh Paint by Garman; Ken Perlman, principal, John Burns Real Estate Consulting; Rose Quint, assistant VP for survey research, NAHB; Jeremy Wacksman, chief marketing officer, Zillow; Dawn Zuber, owner, Studio Z Architecture and past chair for the AIA's Custom Residential Architects Network.

to be part of the American dream."

44 **WEBSITES.** Those young buyers want to feel empowered and be prepared before seeing a property in person—and they want to use their smartphones to do it. "[A website that is] mobile friendly is very important to potential buyers," says Jessica Lautz, managing director of survey research for the National Association of Realtors. "They want to be able to visualize themselves in that home before they even go on a home tour." Beyond just floor plans, key online browsing tools should include inspection reports, real-time lot availability, virtual tours, and video.

45 **LOW STRESS.** With Millennials facing difficulties with saving for a traditionally sized down payment, new-home builders have an opportunity to create a lower-stress buying environment away from the pressures of bidding wars and with options across price ranges, Zillow's Wacksman says. "There's an opportunity to market and reach out to those folks and be a better alternative for them." **PB**

Katy Tomasulo writes about design from her home on Bainbridge Island, Wash.