

Building Better

Homeowners look to cut energy use and maintenance while indulging in sybaritic bathrooms and outdoor rooms

BY MARY VINNEDGE

WITH THE GREAT RECESSION IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR,

homebuilding has hit the accelerator. The overriding trend is for better homes, not necessarily bigger ones, according to Joe Costantin, principal at J. Costantin Architecture in Morristown; Tom Degnan, a member of the American Institute of Architects and principal of design-build firm Degnan Design Group in Spring Lake; and Catherine Knight, AIA, of Knight Architects LLC in Princeton.

How do they define *better*? Durable/low-maintenance exterior materials, energy/environmental considerations, reimaged bathrooms, and well-appointed outdoor rooms—all with traditional exteriors and open-plan interiors continuing to dominate. Here's how Costantin, Degnan and Knight drill down into these trends.

DURABLE/LOW-MAINTENANCE EXTERIOR MATERIALS

Exterior walls are likely brick, stone, stucco and/or ever-more-popular cement-based composite siding rather than wood. The composites are dead ringers for wood but don't rot. "We see a greater number of people understanding these products," Degnan says.

Costantin says vinyl trim boards offer another way to reduce maintenance, and Knight notes the

latest innovation is a kiln byproduct, fly ash, being recycled into exterior trim boards. These need paint or stain only about half as often as wood (10 years versus five), and they are more dimensionally stable, Knight says.

Clients are investing in durable roofs such as slate, terra cotta, and fiber-cement shingles. Knight says she often specifies long-life asphalt shingles with copper and steel accents on porticos and porches.

Easy-care windows are getting plenty of attention also. Aluminum-clad wood, simulated divided-light windows deliver a handsome look that can go many years without repainting. "Unless you tap on them, you really can't tell they're not wood," Costantin says. "They're more efficient, with fewer leaks." That's the perfect segue into ...

ENERGY/ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Driven by social conscience and the desire for lower utility bills, the architects say, clients select materials and equipment that respect the environment. Degnan, a LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) professional, says a 30 percent tax credit encourages home-

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■ TREND ■

Low-Maintenance and Energy Efficiency



COURTESY OF J. COSTANTIN ARCHITECTURE LLC

During a renovation designed by J. Costantin Architecture LLC in Morristown, this Mendham house was stripped down to the plywood sheathing. Then durable, low-maintenance Hardiplank (fiber-cement) siding and trims made of fiber-cement (Hardiplank) and PVC (Azek) were installed along with insulated aluminum windows and an energy-efficient Tyvek membrane.

■ TREND ■

Environmentally Friendly Products



COURTESY OF KNIGHT ARCHITECTS LLC

Natural oil finish floors are environmentally friendly and low-maintenance, says Princeton architect Catherine Knight, who designed this space. They're especially popular with dog lovers because they resist claw marks, and if they are scratched you just apply more oil to cover them. The oil finish is easy to refresh without sanding, Knight says.

■ TREND ■

Bringing the Indoors Out



COURTESY OF DEGNAN DESIGN GROUP INC.

Degnan Design Group Inc. of Spring Lake often plans and builds outdoor rooms designed to blur the line between indoors and outdoors (it helps that lots of glass provides a terrific vista). Amenities include fireplaces, televisions, roofs, bars and various appliances.

■ TREND ■

Spa Bathrooms

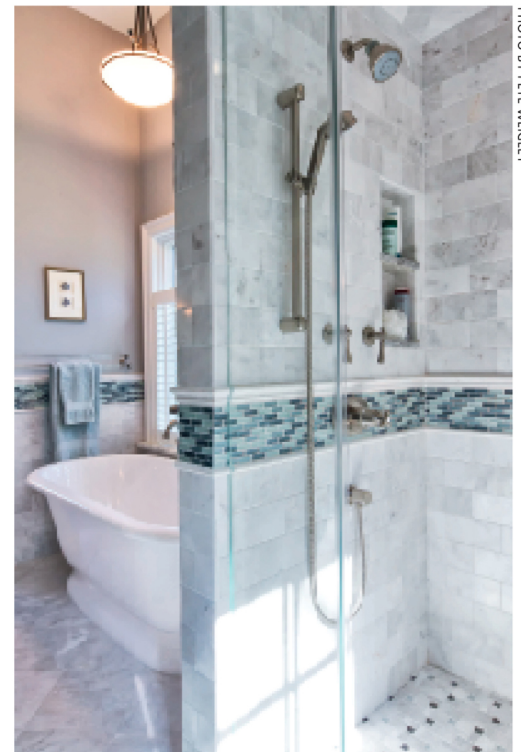


PHOTO BY PETE WEIGLEY

Knight also designed this Princeton master bathroom, which has a pedestal-base soaking tub plus a roomy rainhead-equipped shower and a recess for soaps. The trim tiles are rectangular glass.

Other Trends

Tom Degnan, Catherine Knight and Joe Costantin diverged on some architecture trends.

For instance, Degnan says client wish lists call for trims and interior details (V-groove and tongue-in-groove panels are two examples) that enhance the interior architecture. He adds that his clients — who often are building second or third homes near the shore — want traditional architecture that looks old but is new.

Knight cites open kitchens with high-end appliances such as steam ovens, microwave drawers, water filtration systems, beverage refrigerators and oversize hoods.

■ TREND ■

Detailed Millwork



COURTESY OF DEGNAN DESIGN GROUP INC.

Clients of Degnan Design Group Inc., which creates many shore homes, ask for extensive interior millwork, including wall panels, ceiling treatments, window trims and built-ins to house audiovisual equipment or artwork.

■ TREND ■

Multipurpose Mudrooms



PHOTO BY PETE WIEGLEY

Architect Catherine Knight says multipurpose mudrooms are must-haves for her clients. In this Princeton house, she equipped the mudroom with a desk, a generously sized charging station (above the desk) and loads of cubbies.

Abutting these kitchens are hardworking mudrooms that include charging stations, cubbies, pantries, laundry areas and possibly a desk — all “so they [homeowners] can keep the kitchen looking beautiful,” Knight says. In addition, several of Knights’ clients have requested sliding barn doors inside their homes (“You can get a wide doorway without the door opening into the room — and they’re fun!”), elevators (some clients start with just shafts that serve as 3½-by-4½-foot closets until equipment is installed for around \$20,000), and rear family staircases as well as front formal staircases.

Costantin’s clients often want to build “close to a commuter corridor” to reduce travel time to work. As a result his company is doing many projects near Chatham, Summit, Short Hills and Morristown. Another highly desirable town is Harding: Building restrictions give it an open, undeveloped feel, he says; excellent highway access and comparatively low taxes ramp up its appeal.

Generators are also big on clients’ wish lists. “Because of the storms — especially Sandy — everybody wants a generator, and most want it so they don’t even know if the power goes off,” Costantin says.

owners to buy solar panels and geothermal heat pumps.

Energy Star and LEED designations boost resale value, Costantin says. He elaborates with further enticements: “Geothermal heating and cooling systems and heat pumps can cut 75 percent of the cost of air-conditioning a house. These can cost no more [upfront] than conventional systems, and you don’t have condensers all around the house.” His firm often specifies highly efficient radiant-heat systems, which provide pleasantly toasty floors, and modulating boiler systems (these can be 96 percent efficient and provide a free bonus: hot water for bathrooms).

Foam insulation is another huge help in reducing heating and cooling bills. “It costs twice as much as batt insulation but pays for itself quickly,” Costantin says.

Other high-tech tools include learning thermostats, which adjust to your usage patterns to maximize comfort without wasting energy, and advanced audio-visual systems you can control from your smartphone or other Internet-enabled computers. From your office or the train, for instance, you can log into your account to turn on the hot tub so it’s ready for a dip when you return home. These AV systems—which control TVs, security alarms, lighting, window treatments and more are surprisingly easy to use, Costantin says. As a bonus, if a malfunction occurs, they can pinpoint the cause instantly.

Other energy/environmental upgrades include LED lighting, low-VOC (volatile organic compound, which pollute air) products such as carpet, paint and European oil finishes on wood floors; locally sourced materials (for instance, stone from Pennsylvania instead of Florida and locally harvested oak, walnut and cherry for floors); low-U-value windows; power-stingy appliances; and water-saving toilets (Knight says most of her clients choose 1.28 gallons per flush; a few install dual 1.6/1 gpf models).

REIMAGINED BATHROOMS

Degnan sees larger bathrooms, sometimes with more than one room: “Clients tell us they want home-based spas in the master bathroom. They use high-end materials—Calacatta marble is hot right now.”

Creature comforts include steam showers, whirlpool tubs, and large showers with room for more than one person, sometimes with a bench.

By contrast, Knight says she has only removed whirlpool tubs, not added them. In smaller homes, owners may forgo tubs in favor of large showers, often equipped with rainheads. However, when there’s room for a shower and a tub, clients request pedestal or footed tubs, she adds. The roomy showers often have no thresholds, Knight says, which preserves accessibility if the homeowners become mobility-challenged later.

In secondary bathrooms, Jack-and-Jills have given way to en-suite layouts, Knight says, “and these work better when the kids come back to visit as adults.”

WELL-APPOINTED OUTDOOR ROOMS

“People are really, really asking for outdoor living spaces like you see in Tuscany or the French Riviera. Sometimes we put these in what we call interstitial spaces, the outdoor spaces between building components... U-shape buildings provide an intimate courtyard,” Costantin says. “The point is to blur the line between the indoor and outdoor spaces.”

These rooms may be verandas or more-open spaces—perhaps defined by pergolas, which give a sense of enclosure; if deciduous vines grow on them, the plants block harsh sun in summer but let the sun warm the home in winter, he explains. “People are putting in barbecues, fire pits and outdoor fireplaces—elements that allow them to take their activities outside, Costantin adds.

Degnan agrees, mentioning further perks such as outdoor bars and refrigeration. “Clients want to maximize outdoor living, something with roof covers,” he says. “Outdoor fireplaces and heating devices extend the time you can use the outdoor rooms comfortably.” **DNJ**

Mary Vinnedge, Design NJ’s social media editor, loves her small Texas home but still experiences pangs of house envy when writing articles like these. Email her through EditorForRent.com and WritingGenie.com.