

Small Homes, Small Details Among New Home Design Trends
Cache Valley Home Builders Association

Open floor plans, energy-efficient features, and lots of closet space are among the elements that today's home buyers are seeking in newly-constructed homes, according to industry experts at the 2011 International Builders' Show. The research and trends presented at the show offer valuable insights and information to home builders so that they can build homes that appeal to the modern consumer's preferences.

Once-popular features such as large living rooms, soaking tubs and second-floor laundry rooms are now out of favor. Home buyers found that the convenience of not having to carry laundry to another floor was outweighed by the noise that interrupted their sleep.

Home buyers are looking for small details in their new homes, such as a built-in desk under a stairway, or a courtyard tucked between two downstairs bedrooms. Successful home builders "create memory points," said design trends seminar speaker Kate Brennan of the Chicago design firm Mary Cook and Associates.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average size of a new single family home decreased from 2,438 square feet to 2,377 in 2010. This made designing to maximize space a popular theme at the show. One session focused exclusively on new ideas in home design for floor plans measuring 2,500 square feet or less.

Open floor plans are now in high demand because they are not only more practical for entertaining – the hosts can interact with their dinner guests in a spacious kitchen while they are preparing food – but the lack of walls and closed-off spaces make the home seem much larger.

The kitchen is now the hub of the home more than ever. Even if busy families are bringing home takeout, they want the kitchen island to be large enough to serve a multi-tasking purpose as a place to do homework, crafts, and pay bills – as well as to enjoy coffee on a Sunday morning.

Natural finishes are also more popular. Recycled flooring, using a mix of wood grains on the cabinets and architectural details that reflect the indigenous building of the region – such as using stucco in the Southwest – are more important to buyers.

Session panelists also shared that home builders should pay attention to a growing group of home buyers: WINKs – Women with No Kids. These women have distinct preferences that don't quite fit into the usual categories that home designers talk about: first-time buyers who tend to be singles and young professionals, move-up buyers who usually have children, and empty-nesters.

WINKs have more buying power than a generation ago and are seeking smaller homes that have multipurpose rooms for entertaining along with intimate “retreat” spaces for themselves.

A survey of 20,000 home buyers in the United States and Canada points out that there are a number of features in new homes that are considered non-negotiable across almost all demographic groups, said Paul Cardis of AVID Ratings Co., who spoke at a seminar on new design preferences.

The top five features include walk-in closets – mentioned by 66 percent of first-time buyers as a “must have” – energy-efficient appliances, linen closets, a large kitchen and the overall efficiency of the home, Cardis said.