

Features

House of the future NOT SO BIG

*Cecil trend still favors big, showy new homes

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They won't have robot maids, escalators or floating car ports. But most homes built over the next decade will cater to the tastes and technological whims of the nation's wealthy, according to results from a recent study.

That means energy-conscious appliances, advanced wiring and lighting systems, and larger kitchens and bathrooms will soon become standard features in new-construction homes, according to recently issued results from the National Association of Home Builders' (NAHB's) "Home of the Future" study.

The study, based on polls of home architects, designers, marketers and manufacturers from all over the country, mostly reflects what upper-class Americans want.

It reports that the "average" homes built between now and 2015 will span at least 2,330 square feet. Most will include a front porch; a one-story entry foyer; a parlor, retreat or library instead of a living room; at least four bedrooms, 2.5 to 3.5 bathrooms; a separate enclosure for the toilet in the master bath; a fiber-optic network; and programmable thermostats in each room.

AT HOME HERE

Local experts in the home-design and -building fields say the study's results are not shocking; they simply follow what has been happening to the American home since the 1980s.

Just a couple generations ago, from the 1950s into the late-70s, post-war American life in Cecil County included an upswing of 1,200-square-foot bungalows with three bedrooms and one bathroom, built side-by-side. Families with just one working parent were able to comfortably afford one of these new homes and live out the American Dream: 2.5 kids, one car, one pet, steak on Sundays and a front yard just big enough for a baseball toss.

Yet those homes now seem dwarfed next to developments full of brand-new homes that cost \$300,000 and way beyond.

"It's still very much an upscale market," said John Kortecamp, executive vice president and CEO of Maryland Home Builders Association. "But there is still a product for most people, except first-time

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Architect Mark Clark, seated, with Heather Hylinski and Richard Rinehart, all of Clark Design Group, which creates plans for about a dozen homes each year in Cecil County. Clark said it's not unusual these days for clients to spend \$80,000 on the kitchen cabinets alone. CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY ADELMA GREGORY-BUNNELL

homebuyers.”

He pins the surge in home values since the 1980s on a relative shortage of “buildable” land n especially here.

“Cecil County is not exactly a hotbed of development, but you do get the spillover effect from other jurisdictions,” he said. “Think about where you are on the I-95 corridor; you’ve got major job centers right above you in Philadelphia, and in Harford County, and with what’s about to happen in Aberdeen, you’re right in the eye of the storm.”

More than half of the large-home buyers in Cecil County are over 40 years old and from out-of-state, said Mark Clark, owner of Clark Design Group, an Elkton firm that custom-designs about 12 homes locally per year.

For a new-home buyer to secure a plot of land near the water (water is the chief draw for people hoping to build big homes here), it typically costs around \$750,000, Clark said n and that’s just for the land, not the house.

“Believe it or not, a plan on the water in Cecil County is a bargain for these people compared to what it costs in other states,” he said.

WHAT THEY WANT

Among those willing to shell out half a million dollars and more for new homes here, Sunrooms and home offices are popular requests, Clark said, while a comfort-driven family room is starting to replace the living room that used to sit just off the front hall. New homes are also focusing less on “formal” dining rooms; instead, buyers are asking for one “great room” that is a kitchen and dining room combined.

“Kitchens are getting a lot bigger,” he said. “It’s like a status symbol right now. Clients are regularly spending \$80,000 on kitchen cabinets alone.”

Bathrooms are also growing, and usually include a Jacuzzi tub, he said.

Meanwhile, in addition to a big bathroom, master-bedroom suites now often include a “sitting room” with space for a couch and television. Clark has also seen a recent trend in Prince or Princess Suites n “It’s like a master bedroom for the oldest daughter or son,” he said.

Likewise, newer-model homes often include private quarters for another member of the family: mom and dad.

“In-law suites are very common,” he said. “Typically they’re a little wing or addition built onto the house; everyone wants mom and dad to have their own suite.”

This type of arrangement often helps the couple afford the house, he said, as a parent or set of parents might sell their own house and give the couple the proceeds, or pay rent each month.

Clark has noticed a lean toward home models that cost more to custom-build but are lower-maintenance, thus they eventually save buyers money and hassle.

Windows used to all be made out of wood, he said; they are now often vinyl and more energy efficient. Plastic insulation could cut energy bills in half over the next decade, while clients are asking for synthetic home exteriors like vinyl that don’t require paint.

An oft-requested “intelligent” house design includes built-in wiring and cable, and computerized controls

for security systems already in place, Clark said. Many homes will soon have a thermostat for each room, instead of one control for the whole house.

"We'll even start to see homes where people have a remote control to make their stove start cooking n from the office," he said. "People are already starting to ask for this."

People are also starting to request floors made out of renewable resources like bamboo and cork, Kortecamp said, and light fixtures that use energy-efficient florescent bulbs.

Homebuyers are willing to ask for these upgrades at the outset because they're certain it will improve the home's resale value, Kortecamp said, adding that the average length of stay in a home in this region is about eight years.

"Up to this point, there's been an unrelenting increase in the size of the home," he said. "And there's been an inclusion of the upscale amenities. It's a reflection of a very strong escalation in the value of a home."

Many of today's new-homebuyers still want really big homes n 4,000 to 6,000 square feet and beyond, Clark said.

"Sometimes people are probably buying houses bigger than they can comfortably afford," he said.

But both Kortecamp and Clark agree that home sizes may taper off a bit, following a major "scale-back" movement in the industry. Inspired by a book called "The Not So Big House," by architect Sarah Susanka, the new design concepts involve building homes smaller, but adding interesting alcoves and useful "spaces" lacking in many of today's sprawling homes. Susanka has gone on to write a series of "Not So Big" books.

"It gets away from that type of house that looks big and pregnant but not very interesting," Clark said.

Thinking 'Not So Big':

There is an alternative to the McMansions going up in the soybean fields . . . it's the more sensible dwelling showcased in "The Not So Big House."

According to Sarah Susanka, author of this landmark book, opting for a smaller house does not mean settling. In fact, she is an advocate of simpler, cozier, better-built houses that put money into the details, not the size. The long-term benefit is a house that's less expensive to heat and cool, and that's a better fit all-around. Think luxury sedan instead of big, boxy gas-guzzling SUV. More good news: instead of using up farmland for that McMansion, you can convert your existing house by adapting some of the Not So Big ideas. Part New Age philosophy, part glossy photos, this is a fun book for anyone who daydreams about the perfect house.

From "The Not So Big House": "Is there a way to think beyond ordinary boundaries to create a house that works better for us? This is the secret to designing a Not So Big House n the ability to think creatively, responding to needs and wishes, not to preconceived notions of what a house should be."