

Hot at home: Thinking of building? Here's what's trending.

- By Laurie Kaiser
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This Essex home in Clarence features modern vinyl siding combined with stacked stones for a low-maintenance exterior. (Jim Lesinski)

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Freshly built homes are like haute couture — they provide the latest, trendiest and most sought-after features. And those features are fluid. As hemlines and pant widths change through the years, so do bathroom designs, cabinet colors and space-saving must-haves.

Here are some of the features that today's home buyers are demanding — and how local homebuilders are responding.

Spa showers

Remember when Jacuzzi bathtubs were the standard of luxury? Now more homebuyers want their luxury standing up. Local homebuilders say one big in-demand feature is the luxury or super shower. With multiple or rain showerheads, built-in benches, glass doors and intricate tile work, these showers are built in addition to, or in place of, a tub in the master bathroom.

"It's perfectly acceptable to have a comfortable, luxurious shower and no tub," said Andrew Romanowski, president of Alliance Homes.

Anthony Marrano, manager of the design center of Marrano Homes, agreed. "People are really decking out their showers and making them bigger and in different shapes," Marrano said. "Some people want handheld faucets; others want rain heads (water coming from the ceiling). We're doing a lot of really elaborate tile designs around the shower, too."

Warmer kitchens

Recessed lighting, double sinks and roomy eating areas are big. While urban-looking kitchens remain popular, some homeowners are opting for a homier look through warm paint colors (think coral) and Shaker-style cabinets.

"When we first started building in 1992, customers were primarily selecting white cabinets," said Phil Nanula, president of 23-year-old Essex Homes. "Only one out of 100 would consider a stained wood cabinet." Through the years cabinet trends shifted to light wood, such as Maple, and then to darker shades.

"Now white is starting to reappear," he said, "but in a Shaker style with recessed panels."

Homebuyers also are choosing cabinets painted gray, off-beige and/or shades of green, and with glazing to create an antique look, Marrano said. Granite countertops are still must-haves for many new homebuyers, but now they can opt for pre-cut granite pieces.

"It keeps the cost down when you do not have to purchase a whole slab of granite," Marrano said.

More efficient spaces

Even in upscale homes, buyers are looking for an efficient use of money and space. While there are still cathedral ceiling foyers, there are far fewer two-story family rooms, Nanula said.

"High ceilings don't have the popularity they once did," he said. "Those rooms are harder to heat and cool and it's a waste of space. When you get your footprint more organized, your costs go down."

New builds include rooms not only above the family room, but also the garage. Open concept plans continue to be popular in both patio

homes and traditional single-family homes; they provide a nice flow between kitchen, dining room and family room.

"We're seeing a return to classic designs — open floor plans that focus on entertaining areas and outdoor living spaces," Romanowski said.

Another space homebuyers are requesting is the larger and more organized mudroom.

"Mudrooms are now secondary foyers with lots of built-in features such as cubbies and drop spots for cell phones and keys, to ward off clutter," he said.

Homebuyers also seek energy efficiency. "Homes are more efficient and greener than they have ever been before," Romanowski said. "We're able to seal against air or water infiltration with energy efficient windows and other products that make the house tighter and more economical to maintain."

While fireplaces have always been popular in a market like Buffalo, two-sided gas fireplaces, which fit between two rooms such as the family room and sunroom, are a newer option. They warm the rooms more quickly and effectively than wood-burning fireplaces typically do, Nanula said.

"People love the convenience," he said. "Just point your remote and you have a warm room."