

Creating products that delight, that people didn't even know existed much less knew they wanted, made Apple a success, and it can help home builders sell houses, too. The hard part is figuring out what buyers don't know they want.

BUILDER asked a number of successful home builders, designers, and architects what they are designing, building, and installing in homes that are making home shoppers want a house so much that they can overcome their fears of job loss and falling home values.

Their answers include ideas that are as creative as new contemporary design and as simple as a place near the door to keep the family's shoes corralled. They are as soul pleasing as natural light and as body pampering as warm bathroom floors.

They can be eye candy or practical, offering comfort and coziness or time- or money-saving. But mostly, they are things that make home shoppers say "wow" and inspire a vision of a better life in a new house.



2 Elemental Desires

Human beings are drawn to fire, water, light, and views. And so it follows that builders that create spaces that bring in natural light, offer green-space views, and add eye-catching fire and water features are selling more homes.

Fire features available today go beyond the traditional wood-burning fireplace. There are alcohol-burning fire elements that can go anywhere inside a home, and gas units that don't require chimneys. Outdoor fire pits that shoppers can envision themselves gathering around outdoors are buyer attractors, as well.

Water features have moved beyond swimming pools. Fountains or falls that splash or flow in silken sheets can be teamed with static swimming pools or tied into fire elements for a double-whammy impact.

Homes that are thoughtfully sited to take advantage of views and designed with enough windows to bring in ample amounts of natural light make buyers feel good and help them imagine a better life in the home.

"You want a home that can make you happy," says Robert Bowman, president of Charter Homes and Neighborhoods, a Pennsylvania builder that recently sold 30 homes in 30 days. "The best way to do that is to provide tons of natural light."



3 Comfortably Communing With Nature

Even in northern climes, buyers are taking the plunge with houses that have outdoor spaces that seamlessly connect with the indoors.

Developer/builder Irvine Co. commissioned home designs a couple of years ago that added a space called a California Room, essentially a three-sided screened porch that connects to the home through large glass slide-away doors. The plans have been a big success.

Architects are cleverly using the walls of buildings turned in a puzzle-like fashion to create outdoor spaces even on tight lots where homes are attached. "These are cool courtyards that are a fun place to stay and hang out," says Manny Gonzalez, a KTG principal.

Orlando, Fla., architect Phil Kean of Phil Kean Designs has found a way to make such spaces even more practical in Florida where, unlike California, bugs can make a porch or other indoor-outdoor space unusable. He employs Phantom Screens, which can be lowered by electric motors on buggy days or raised into a hidden compartment when the mosquitoes aren't out to allow a seamless view from house, across the veranda, out to the pool and beyond.



4 Visions of Leisure

Sean Ruppert, principal of OPaL LLC, a Lanham, Md.-based home builder, calls them memory points—special places designed into homes that prompt potential buyers to start imagining living happily in the homes. Sometimes it's a cozy place to have coffee in front of a window in the morning. Often it's a kitchen integrated into a great room that sparks thoughts of companionable family times. OPaL has a trademark memory point—window seats.

"We always do a window seat, whether it's at the end of a site line or on a stair [landing] by a window," says Ruppert. "It doesn't cost a lot of money. It's wood and trim. I think it helps sort of capture a moment in time" that sticks in a buyer's memory as pleasant, says Ruppert. "I really think that our homes have a lot of such moments in them."



1 View From the Street

Nobody wants to pull into somebody else's driveway by mistake. Post-recession buyers are unwilling to settle for the same uninspired house designs they have been looking at for years, houses they bought during the boom years because there wasn't anything else to choose from.

Successful builders are selling houses that are fresh looking. In some cases, that means neo-traditional styles. Increasingly, though, contemporary-styled home sales are taking off, and not just in California. In Salt Lake City, Garbett Homes can't build its line of modern homes, designed by KTG Group, fast enough to keep up with sales.



5 Formerly Formal

At a time when people are responding to surveys that they plan to spend more time with friends and family, it appears that most of them aren't envisioning that happening in a formal dining room. Rather, great rooms, where buyers can picture themselves cooking, eating, socializing with friends, and watching television together in one big space, is the favored venue for families of all sizes and types.



6 Trite but True

Yes, location is still the main reason why people buy homes. But today location means more than a spot on a map. There are a few things that make a set of coordinates a desirable place to live—and looming large among them is a sense of community.

That's why well-designed master planned communities are still big sellers, even though most of them are a distance from jobs. They offer a sense of community and something that has become a much more salable attribute in recent years: walkability.

The Olson Co., a California builder, is finding success by developing in what it calls "suburban-urban" infill locations along train lines between large cities and the suburbs at nodes where there are restaurants, stores, parks, and other amenities. Even for buyers who can't use the train for work, the locations offer shorter commute times, and also offer greater walkability.

"You are not going to have to get back in the car" after work, says Scott Laurie, president and COO of Olson. "You walk outside your front door and that's where your lifestyle is."



7 Serving Two (or More) Masters

There are a lot of reasons why home buyers might want a house with two owner's suites, one up, and one downstairs: an aging parent moving in, a child moving back home, suitable space for a roommate who is sharing the mortgage, or a comfortable place to sleep when you can't get up the stairs anymore.

Taking all of those contingencies under consideration, Stanley Martin Communities, a Washington, D.C.-area builder, recently redesigned its floor plans to easily allow a downstairs master bedroom with a full-sized en suite bath. It also built a lot more flexible options into the plans that allow the standard home of four bedrooms with two to three and a half baths to expand to as many as seven bedrooms and seven and a half baths.

The changes were made because of feedback from focus groups, Realtors, and survey respondents, including some social media-based ones. "We have been repeatedly hearing back that there was a need for a first-floor master bedroom," says Lauri D. Payson, vice president of marketing at Stanley Martin Communities.



8 A Place for Everything

Fireplaces and fountains may attract the eye, give people warm fuzzies, and help them remember a house. But a home that promises to be free of clutter because there's a place for everything, from pocket change to Wii controllers, makes the hearts of home keepers flutter.

Those who handle the everyday care and cleaning of a house and its inhabitants' clothes, shoes, and pets, salivate over mudrooms that can help keep it all under control. Since the technology boom of the past 10 years, new homes with spaces to hold all the devices, chargers, and wires have a distinct advantage in the minds of buyers.

Phil Kean designs hidden storage for television-related hardware and wires. He also recommends installing chases within walls to allow for any future wiring for solar collectors and other possible new technology. "We don't really know what the next five years is going to bring," he notes.

On the flip side, he also builds in storage for things homeowners want to see, from sculpture collections to the kids' drawings.

"A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them."
— Steve Jobs, founder, Apple



9 The Stingy Energy House

Energy efficiency is not sexy to most buyers. Unless a buyer is living in a house that costs so much to operate that it's seriously impacting the family budget, a new home's energy efficiency isn't likely to be its biggest selling point. On the other hand, builders who don't pay some attention to the issue are likely to get left out as more builders are upping their ante in the energy-saving department and advertising it heavily.

But while low HERS scores are not likely to be the main factor in a home sale, they do differentiate new homes from older homes. Plus, some builders are successfully leveraging their homes' efficiencies to upsell more options to buyers. The reasoning is that buyers can afford a larger house payment if they pay less in utilities every month.

And there's one additional item that a builder can offer that will increase energy efficiency and make buyers very happy on cold mornings—radiant heated floors. They help the house, as well as the toes, stay toasty warm.



10 Flexible Alone Time

Great rooms are pretty great, but not all the time. Sometimes people need a break from all that togetherness. Architects are responding by creating "away" spaces that can be used for a variety of activities. A flex room on the main level can be a den, a hobby room, an extra bedroom, an exercise space, or a place to corral the kids' toys. Upstairs, loft areas can morph into another bedroom, a children's playroom, a study, a classroom for home schooling, a home office, or a second television watching area.

Builders say the best part about flexible spaces is that they allow a wider group of potential buyers to envision the space as meeting their own needs now and in the future. **B**