

Moving Outside

by Tom Lassiter

Architects and builders are listening to their customers. They're creating outdoor spaces that integrate with the overall design and accommodate the lifestyle desired by buyers.

America's homebuilders have discovered the appeal of the Outdoor Room. From the Carolinas to Texas, to Michigan and beyond, builders are integrating outdoor living areas into their new home designs. This move isn't simply a marketing ploy; designers and architects have not merely slapped a new name on spaces formerly called decks and patios. What we're seeing is a shift in home design philosophy that reflects how growing numbers of Americans want to live – indoors and out — in the 21st century.

Many factors drive this trend. Fashion and the media undoubtedly play a large role, as it's almost impossible these days to pick up a shelter magazine or watch HGTV without catching a reference to outdoor living. Home-

buyers have come to expect certain outdoor living features, regardless of price. If those features aren't part of the initial package with a new home, they like knowing that the home's design anticipates adding a well-integrated Outdoor Room in the future.

In this age of tear-downs, in-fills and shrinking lot sizes, savvy builders recognize that an Outdoor Room maximizes the use of space that is becoming increasingly dear. This pressure to do more with less has led to some dramatic innovations that give traditional home elements, such as a garage or courtyard wall, a new, additional purpose. Even certain mechanical features, such as pool heaters,

Outdoor Room by Dominick Tringali, AIA Michigan architect.

are finding new uses to lengthen the Outdoor Room season.

"It's happening all over the country, any place people have money," says Leslie Ensor, editor of *Custom Home* magazine and *Custom Home Outdoors*. As is often pointed out in these pages, Outdoor Rooms are not just a Sun Belt phenomenon. Her magazines recently have featured houses with Outdoor Rooms in Minnesota and Indiana. "People in the North," says Ensor, "are finding that if you can only use your yard for a few months in the summer, you really want to be able to enjoy it when you can. An Outdoor Room makes it so much more livable."

The Outdoor Room concept found initial acceptance at the high end of the housing market. Now those same concepts, albeit scaled down to match the economics of the customer, are turning up in middle- and upper-middle-class new home markets. It's doable, and people shopping new construction increasingly expect it.

Bonnie Hanvey is vice president, eastern North America, for Street of Dreams, which organizes luxury home shows in markets across the United States. "You can spend a fortune putting together an outdoor space, or you can do something like a fireplace and nice patio furniture," she observes. "Everyone can do that at some level."

As the Outdoor Room concept spreads across the nation and becomes more accepted in new homes selling for between \$200,000 and \$400,000, opportunities for retailers of casual furnishings, grills and other outdoor living amenities will increase.

"This is a trend we see," says Dominick Tringali, AIA, a Michigan architect whose home designs have been adopted by builders in 14 states. "Spaces that had a tendency to be in high-end homes are getting into the other end of the marketplace."

Case in point: Tringali's firm has designed a community where homes with Outdoor Rooms will sell for under \$200,000. "We're incorporating those outdoor spaces and outdoor features people are looking for," he says. "We feel it's going to be a huge success."

Home builders serving moderate- and middle-income families, and who have embraced the Outdoor Room concept, say buyers have responded positively.

David Weekley Homes, a major builder with projects in seven states, began offering designs with Outdoor

Rooms a couple of years ago after surveying customers about how they wanted to use their new homes. The homes were selling in the low \$400,000 range, says Pat Harkins, a project manager in Austin, Texas.

"At that price point, which was very popular, folks told us they wanted to spend a lot of time outdoors," Harkins says. They specifically mentioned having a place to enjoy coffee outdoors in the morning and a place to relax with a drink outdoors in the evening. They wanted to cook and entertain and have the space integrate well with the interior design and flow of the home.

Rohde says. "We try to extend that home to the outside and create not just a back porch, but a living experience."

Typical David Weekley features include an under-counter, stainless steel GE refrigerator and a stainless steel GE gas grill. Typical dimensions are about 19-by-19 feet, and the space is situated outside the family room at the rear of the home. Cooking and eating naturally take place on one side of the Outdoor Room, with seating and conversation areas around the fireplace on the other side.

With a roof overhead, a fireplace and wall elements that embrace the space, Rohde's interpretation of an out-



The Melissa by David Weekley Homes, in Atlanta Georgia.

David Weekley Homes' chief designer, Bob Rohde, created designs that allowed for the Texas summer heat while using materials that complemented the homes' overall style.

The Outdoor Room spaces, which David Weekley Homes calls "outdoor livings," are covered and feature stained, beaded-board ceilings and recessed can lights. Floors are tile or flagstone, while the outdoor fireplace (with a gas log lighter) is Texas limestone, a regional favorite.

"What we try to do in all our homes is have a relationship to the rear yard,"

door living area truly aims to be room-like. "We've been very successful with big porches," he says, clarifying the difference between porches and outdoor livings. "These go to the next level. They give you a whole different feel and experience when you are in them."

"These outdoor livings are a place where you can go in any weather to read a book or watch TV over the fireplace," he says. "It truly becomes an extension of the home."

David Weekley Homes learned that its Texas homebuyers had specific notions about an outdoor fireplace: It should be

wood-burning (with a gas fire starter), and should be sited so it doesn't block the view of the backyard. "That was very important," Harkins says.

Prior to incorporating Outdoor Rooms into its home designs, David Weekley's sales in a couple of developments had been flat, Harkins says. Once outdoor living designs were introduced, sales took off. About 80 percent of homebuyers chose to have Outdoor Rooms in a development called Muirfield.

Adding an Outdoor Room costs the builder from \$18,000 to \$20,000, Harkins says. "You can kind of guess what we charge our customers," he says. "I don't want to release our margins."



Outdoor Rooms allow new home builders to better compete with the resale market, says Jenny Sullivan, senior editor/design, for *Builder* magazine. Homebuyers often must choose between new construction on smaller lots, though with the benefits of new technologies and features, and older homes in established neighborhoods with mature trees and landscaping.

"A lot of builders are starting to offer fully amenitized Outdoor Rooms as a way of competing against resale properties," she says. "Landscaping and the outdoors can really make a big difference. It's also a great way to differentiate themselves from the competition in a soft market. But now everybody's jumping on the bandwagon."

Builders have learned it's not enough just to build an Outdoor Room; they also must properly outfit the space in a model home or show house. That's when many call upon Kathy Andrews Interiors, a Houston interior design firm that specializes in model homes, show houses and apartments for clients nationwide. Director of design Karen Richardson has

witnessed the evolution of builders' awareness from the time "they would barely do a concrete pad. Now they know how big outdoor living really is."

The greatest advances have come in the last three years, Richardson says, as builders have gone "from putting out an ugly mesh dining set to using powder-coated furniture with cushions, outdoor art and rugs" in their model homes. "We're even doing outdoor drapery sometimes."

Mark Kirby, a builder in Raleigh, North Carolina, realized the importance of a fully conceived Outdoor Room in 1998. His company was teamed with a Memphis architectural firm to create a "home of the millennium" in which "the outdoor space was supposed to live like a room of the house."

The showcase home drew about 25,000 visitors. "It showed us in no uncertain terms that there was a preference for this type of thing," says Kirby, a partner in Dixon/Kirby & Co. "We realized that, rather than the promise of a nice backyard, we had to deliver the backyard fulfilled."

In business since 1984, Kirby has witnessed housing design trends come and go. The two-story family room has gone away, and the traditional living room is almost extinct. He hasn't built a deck in years. People, especially aging Baby Boomers, would rather spend their money on flexible spaces indoors and a fully landscaped exterior with maintenance entrusted to a homeowners' association.

"We have shifted to smaller homes with terrific locations," says Kirby, who builds 15 to 20 homes a year with prices ranging from \$700,000 to \$3.5 million. Rather than spend time commuting from the suburbs, Kirby sees homebuyers willing to spend more for smaller lots close to urban centers. "My \$30,000 landscape budget on a quarter-acre will go a long way," he says.

One current client has requested "a resort location" in the backyard of his one-fifth acre lot, the former site of apartments. Amenities will include a pool, hot tub, firepit, grill, bathhouse and an all-season powder room. There's also a fireplace and a 60-inch television. "It will be the nicest and most expensive room of the house," Kirby says, accounting for 10 percent of the \$1.5 million budget.

Kirby's firm usually budgets three to five percent of a home's overall cost for the Outdoor Room and landscaping. "And I know we err on the high side of that," he says.



Outdoor Room off the kitchen by Simonini Builders.

Kirby isn't a big proponent of outdoor fireplaces; he prefers firepits, which invite people to sit in a circle and interact like youngsters around a campfire. He observes that most outdoor fireplaces in his market don't get used, "which really flies in the face of conventional wisdom."

Nor has Kirby installed a sink or a refrigerator for a full-blown outdoor kitchen. "There's still no interest in outdoor kitchens except in very high-end homes," he says.

Features aside, the characteristic that separates today's Outdoor Rooms from the patios, decks and porches of years past is the integration of the space into the overall design and lifestyle.

"Outdoor living is just a natural extension of who we are and what we are doing," says David Gernatt, project manager for David Weekley Homes in Atlanta. Rather than just a house, homebuyers

today want to become part of a community, and an Outdoor Room creates opportunities to build and enjoy community.

Rohde, Weekley's vice president for product design, says certain elements of adjoining rooms had to be rethought to make the covered outdoor living area work well with interior spaces. Large covered porches usually cut daylight and make adjoining rooms darker than normal. To counter this, Rohde raised the height of the porch roofline to create more vertical space and installed transoms over windows. Interior light was restored.

Porches, courtyards and patios grow in importance as density increases, says Sullivan of *Builder* magazine. These defined outdoor spaces create a transitional zone between indoors and out, between the public street and neighbors and the interior of the home. Many homebuyers may not realize the importance

of that space, but they feel drawn to it.

"Even if it's just a small courtyard or porch that connects with the outdoors," Sullivan says, "that really resonates with buyers."

Smaller lots with bigger houses can actually create opportunities for innovation outdoors, she says. Architects and planners can maximize space utilization and turn what might be viewed as a wasted space into a favorite area of the home. For example, in localities that allow zero lot lines (that is, building on the property line with no setback), the wall of the adjacent house may double as a courtyard wall, creating an intimate, protected space for the homeowner. Properly sized casual furniture and access to interior rooms turns that exterior space, previously an afterthought, into a benefit.

"That's a good example where a higher density actually works to your advantage," Sullivan says, noting that "the return-on-investment on that kind of stuff is really good."

Alan Simonini, president of Simonini Builders, uses designs by Dominick Tringali for projects clustered about Charleston and Charlotte, North Carolina. Prices of Simonini homes range from \$500,000 to \$5 million, with the average about \$1 million.

"All of our plans have an area with a fireplace and a kitchen with an area to cook and grill, so you have a living room and dining room outside that mirrors the inside," he says. "It seems like we have a lot of people that want that."

Simonini, whose firm has a string of national awards, notes that his customers travel widely and are accustomed to "the nicer resorts and hotels around the world" and "they want to do the same thing when they get home and recreate the vacation experience at home." He's noticed that builders offering less expensive homes also are beginning to incorporate more outdoor living features into their products.

Arteva Homes is a Michigan builder that offers outdoor living options in homes selling for well under \$200,000. At those price points, says vice president Vito Terracciano, homebuyers face tough choices in how to allocate their housing dollars. In many cases, the decision comes down to deciding between an Outdoor Room and a three-car garage. So far, Terracciano says, the garage wins in most cases.

But he's proud that his company, which also builds homes selling for up



House in Chicago by Orren Pickell Designers & Builders.



The Sanctuary outdoor living area is to the rear of a Craftsman-style residence by Simonini Builders. INSET: Exterior view.




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to \$2 million, is giving homebuyers a choice. To stay within budget, Artega Homes had to look for alternatives for the more expensive components of an Outdoor Room. A hand-built masonry fireplace, which costs \$10,000 to \$12,000, was out of the question.

The solution to Artega's fireplace dilemma turned out to be Jimmie's Rustics, a small chain of casual furniture and hearth shops owned by Jimmie Sica. Jimmie's Rustics hooked up Artega Homes with a \$1,200 metal fireplace that was perfect for the application. "People have been wowed by it," Terracciano says.


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thinking go a long way toward making an Outdoor Room feasible for larger numbers of new home buyers and extending the Outdoor Room season, regardless of climate.

For homes in Michigan and other northern latitudes, architect Tringali uses existing features to provide greater protection from the elements. An unimagined designer sees a garage wall. Tringali sees the wall of the detached garage as a windbreak and the setting for an outdoor fireplace. The fireplace is constructed normally, except that the firebox faces outward. Presto! The garage wall now has a focal point for an Outdoor Room seating area. The fireplace mantel holds decorative items, and the wall surfaces are perfect for all-weather art.

Another Tringali innovation: a small boiler system, often installed in Northern homes to heat swimming pools, can do double-duty to heat an Outdoor Room. Before hardscape flooring tiles are laid, tubes are installed in the subfloor of the Outdoor Room. The circulating hot water melts snow and ice in winter and provides additional warmth when the space is used for entertaining.

"We're mixing the spaces extremely well and we make sure (our customers) get the most for their dollars," Tringali says.

For homes in insect-plagued areas, an

Not every homeowner will be able to have an Outdoor Room at closing, but they might be able to afford adding one in three or five years.


Outdoor Room may be screened and designed to accept storm windows in the colder months. Incorporate heated floors, and the investment results in space that can be enjoyed nearly year-round, even in Michigan. (Remember that those Michiganders and Minnesotans really do play outside all winter.)

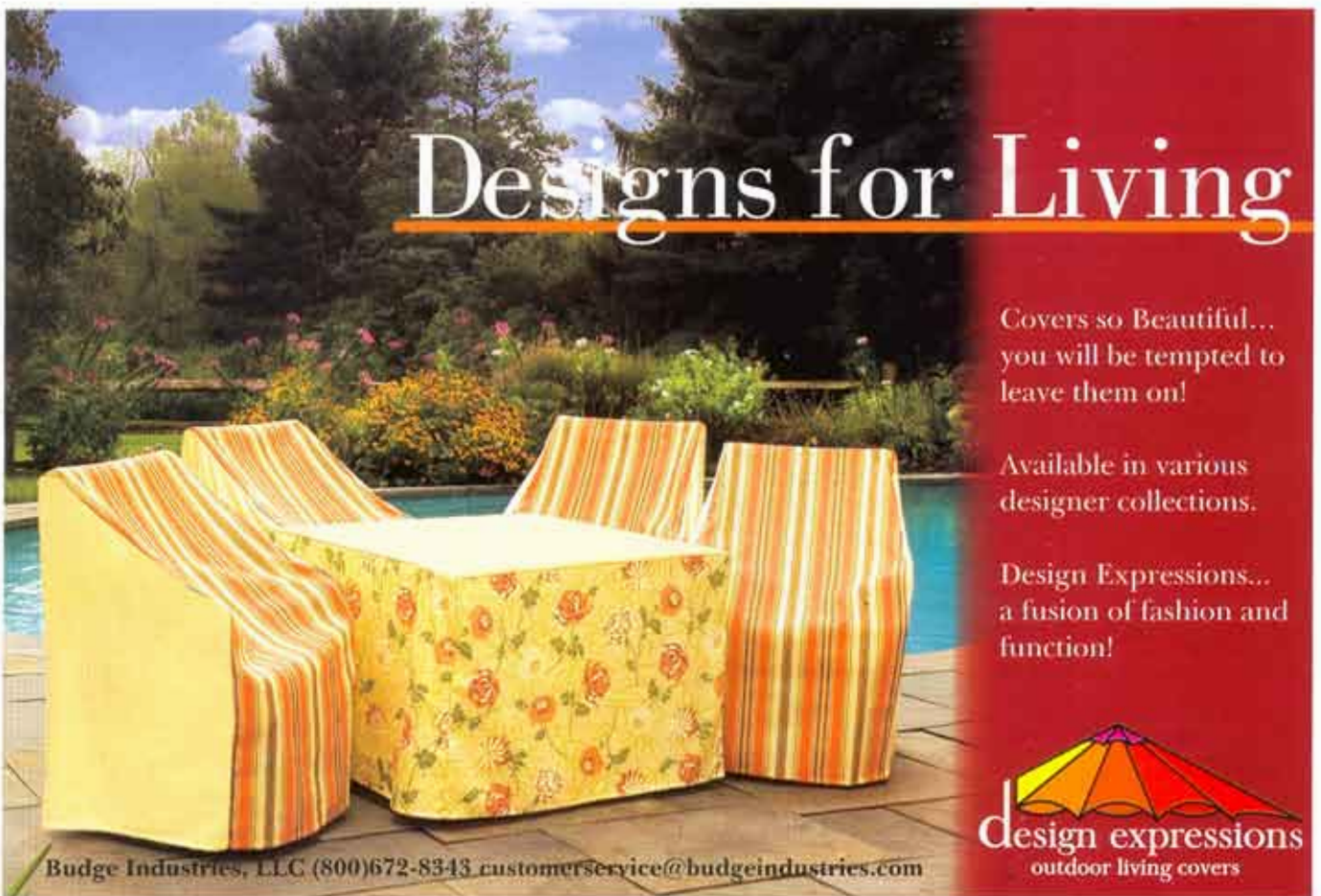
Outdoor and indoor spaces must function harmoniously, Tringali stresses. "The way the door walls work, the way the

vistas work, all those things are inter-mixed with each other," he says. And he recognizes that homeowners may not be able to afford everything at once.

Which brings us to Tringali's latest innovation. He's working with two major home improvement warehouse chains and builders of developments where 300 to 400 homes are planned. Not every homeowner will be able to have an Outdoor Room at closing, but they might be able to afford adding one in three or five years.

The architect envisions a time when the owner of a Tringali-designed home will be able to visit the local Lowe's or Home Depot and order a specific kit with everything necessary to finish out his/her Outdoor Room. When completed, the room will look like it was designed to be there from Day One. Which it was.

A home generally is the largest purchase of a lifetime, and it's apparent that growing numbers of new homes will feature an Outdoor Room. If builders in your area aren't yet offering homes with Outdoor Rooms, chances are they will be. Because if that's happening in Michigan with homes in the \$200,000 range, it can happen anywhere. 




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