



# Right Sizing Your Home

WHILE THE HESITATION TO BUY A HOME MAY BE WANING, THE HOUSING DOWNTURN HAS CHANGED WHAT HOME BUYERS ARE LOOKING FOR IN THEIR LIVING SPACES.

BY REBECCA KONYA

McMansions, those 3,000-square-foot-plus monstrosities that seemed to swallow up suburban landscapes in the early 2000s, are quickly becoming a thing of the past. According to the National Home Builders Association, the average size of a new home is expected to shrink to 2,150 square feet by 2015, which is down 10 percent from 2009.

“The recession changed everything,” says Mike Ruzicka, president of the Greater Milwaukee Association of REALTORS. “It’s a different economic climate and buyers’ needs have changed.”

A recent NAHB survey concludes the recession has had a lasting impact on people, who have shifted their perspective on what they want and need from their homes. For instance, current home buyers are seeking practical and functional space over surplus square footage.

“Buyers today prefer quality of space over quantity of space,” says Beth Jaworski, a real estate agent with Shorewest Realtors.

Along with the recession, lifestyle is also playing a role in the growing demand for smaller houses. Baby boomers in

particular are seeking downsized living spaces that require less maintenance and will remain accessible as they age and their needs change.

“People are beginning to understand that they can make changes to their home, big or small, to improve their lifestyle,” says architect Richard Sherer, principal with Deep River Partners architects in Milwaukee.

Sherer says architectural design has taken on a multigenerational approach so that living spaces can accommodate any age group and physical condition. “You have all these different scenarios like adult children moving back home, grandparents watching their grandkids for extended periods, aging parents moving in with their grown children,” he says. “People want the family home to be accessible to anyone.”

## Reworked Spaces

While the overall footprint of new homes is shrinking, buyers are still looking for flexible living spaces and open areas for entertaining, such as a family room or great room open to the kitchen. Essentially, builders are designing floor plans to fit families’ needs — a sensible approach often referred to as “right size” design.

“People are thinking about how their homes can support their families,” says Sherer. “They want to create a home that identifies with their personality.”

With home sizes falling, more efficient design trends are emerging, including:

- Eliminating formal spaces like dining rooms and dedicated home offices that aren’t frequently used
- Carving out niches in the kitchen or family room for home organization
- Combining spaces like the laundry room and mudroom for more convenience

• Planning kitchens with plenty of storage and lots of counter space for easy food preparation

“What buyers really want is functionality,” says Jaworski.

But a better functioning home doesn’t have to mean sacrificing aesthetics, Sherer says.

“You can incorporate building materials that are durable, but also aesthetically pleasing like natural stone and slate,” he says. “People are recognizing the value of architectural details that feed the soul. That emotional response has become greatly valued by homeowners.”

## Green Goes Mainstream

New homes today are greener than their counterparts a generation ago. Buyers are driving the trend with their concern for energy efficiency, which has resulted in more solid, better-insulated and more comfortable homes.

“People are more worried about energy efficiency today,” Jaworski says. “They don’t want to overpay for utilities.”

Currently, energy-saving windows and water-conserving appliances like direct vent and tankless water heaters top the list of green demands in the area. “They’re great selling features,” Jaworski says.

By 2015, the NAHB predicts the green checklist for new homes will expand to include even more energy-saving features and technology like Low-e windows, engineered wood beams, joists and trusses; water-efficient features such as dual-flush toilets and low-flow faucets; and an Energy Star rating for the whole house.

## Downsized Design

The weakened economy and resulting trend toward smaller, better-quality homes has had a subtle impact on home décor as well. Designers today are focusing on more efficient space planning, and incorporating homeowners’ existing belongings.

Mixing the old with the new has resulted in an eclectic style that doesn’t evoke any particular period. Rather the concentration seems to be on making rooms fresh with wall color, accent pieces and accessories.

“My clients aren’t looking for a particular style,” says Geneane Francour, an interior designer with Peabody’s Interiors in Brown Deer. “We’re mixing styles and working existing furnishings into the design.”

The color palette for 2013 is leaning toward strong, vibrant colors that some professionals refer to as jewel tones. But Tara Wilke, co-owner of McNabb & Risley in Thiensville, says it’s not reminiscent of the 1990s. “This palette is lighter with citron, aquamarines and bright pinks,” she says.

Wilke says the return to brighter colors reflects people’s desire to create a happier, more comfortable home environment. Similarly, she says homeowners are craving textiles, pairing bold patterns like florals, stripes and hand-painted prints with more natural fabrics like linen.

Francour also sees her clients leaning toward a simpler, more casual look for their space. “They want less fussy design, nothing heavy or ornate,” she says.



## Real Estate Rebound

Though new home construction is still down substantially from the heyday of the late 1990s and early 2000s, municipalities in the Milwaukee area are encouraging development again. “That’s a huge change from 15 to 20 years ago,” Ruzicka says. Back then, communities looking to contain residential development put provisions in place that essentially made building more expensive. From higher impact fees to increased lot sizes and bigger setbacks to strict architectural control, building a new home was a costly endeavor.

The real estate market flip-flopped after the bottom dropped out of the market in 2008, and continues to be a buyers’ market. “In the booming years, homes were basically being sold as is,” says Ruzicka. “But now buyers want move-in ready.”

Jaworski, who has been selling real estate since 1992, agrees. Her clients routinely seek well-maintained properties with updated kitchens and bathrooms. “Buyers, especially those with dual incomes or kids, want to move in and start living.”

With interest rates and employment stabilizing, the Milwaukee area real estate

market appears to be rebounding. Over the past year, homes that dropped significantly in value a few years ago are appreciating again. A lack of inventory in the Milwaukee market is also driving up demand. “Sellers are still holding back, waiting for the market to get better so there aren’t enough properties to support the demand for housing currently,” Ruzicka explains. “Hopefully, home prices start rising soon so more properties come on the market.”

Although suburbs still reign supreme for families, Jaworski says first-time buyers without kids and empty nesters prefer a walkable community. The trend has taken such a strong hold in the Milwaukee area the Multiple Listing Service now includes a walk score on its property listings.

In fact, walkscore.com, a website dedicated to measuring neighborhood walkability, ranked Milwaukee as the 15th most walkable large city in the United States, noting city neighborhoods like Northpoint and Murray Hill for their walkability. “It’s a big deal,” says Jaworski. “Buyers today value what an urban community has to offer like public transportation and walkability. It’s a whole different mind-set than 10 or 20 years ago.” **M**