

Real Estate

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According to real estate professionals, quality counters top the list of requirements for many local buyers.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZINN DESIGN BUILD

WHAT BUYERS WANT

BY NANCY E. OATES, CORRESPONDENT

A successful home sale ends with a sigh of relief on both sides. The seller has sold a house in this very competitive market. The buyer has found a home that is a sanctuary from the stresses of daily life.

What sells a house? Learn from the experiences of local builders and real estate brokers.

Peggy Makepeace, a broker with Re/Max Southern Advantage in Pittsboro: What sells a house is a front porch with a rocking chair and a kitchen with granite countertops, Makepeace says. Granite has the cachet of luxury. "Even homes in the \$200,000s have granite," she says. "It's almost like the builder has to plan the kitchen expense around the countertops, not the appliances."

Yvonne Beal, broker-in-charge of Chapel Ridge Realty in Chatham County: Buyers Beal has worked with want a main-floor master suite with a spa-like bath, an upgraded kitchen with energy-efficient appliances and granite countertops, a screen porch, and plenty of trimwork



Above and left: Yvonne Beal of Chapel Ridge Realty says buyers look for plenty of trimwork and crown molding.

and crown molding. Outdoor living spaces that incorporate courtyards and outdoor kitchens attract buyers, as do flex-space options that can be taken over by teens or used for a hobby spot or bonus room, she says. Buyers are forgoing formal living rooms and dining rooms in favor of a main floor home office, a larger breakfast nook and an open great room conducive to entertaining.

"Smaller floor plans are also gaining in popularity," she says, though she has noticed that buyers still want luxury appointments and unique touches throughout, such as barrel-vault, beamed or trussed ceilings and a fireplace in the master bath.

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Curt Hendrickson, owner of Magnum Fine Home Builders in Chapel Hill: Builders have to go that extra mile, Hendrickson says. The entire package, inside and out, has to stand out. “Knockout kitchens sell, so do knockout baths,” he says. “Landscaping is huge. There is really nothing you can cut back on.”

Like many builders, he is incorporating green features in his homes, and he is responding to buyer preference by gradually downsizing the square footage. “People tend to be looking for less square footage,” he says. “But it’s hard to do when you’ve bought a lot for a certain price. Everything is so price-per-square-foot driven.”

Raoul Rushin, principal of Governors Club Realty and Jordan Living Realty in Chatham County: What sells a house today, in Rushin’s experience, is the same as what sold houses five years ago – location and amenities. The Triangle has plenty of land available, compared to markets like New York and Boston, he says, and that draws people looking for brand-new houses. “A resale home’s biggest competitor is a new home,” he says. “Houses that compete well feel fresh. They are kept up, and they have updated baths and kitchens.” Realistic pricing is a must, he says. “Sellers should listen to their real estate agent’s recommendations.”

Rushin deals mostly with high-end properties. In-demand features in a home are price-point sensitive, he says. “If you’re building a 10,000 square-foot, \$4 million house, the home theater is a certainty,” he says. “But if you’re down around \$1.2 million you might be questioning whether you will use it enough to justify it.” Empty-nesters may have every

intention of downsizing, but when they sit down with their architect and builder and talk about the his-and-her home offices and the other space they believe they need, the square footage begins to add up. And, like Hendrickson, Rushin understands the market pressure to build big on a pricey lot. “The mathematics don’t work out very well to do a small, high-end home on an expensive lot,” Rushin says. “The market doesn’t respond well to that. We still seem to use the benchmark of price-per-square-foot, but it’s not a great evaluation tool.”

Carol Ann Zinn, founder of Zinn Design Build in Chapel Hill: buyers expect very good value for their money, particularly in this competitive market, Zinn says. She designs warmth into her houses to they feel like home the minute a prospective buyer walks through the door. Those design details include job-built trim, as opposed to factory-built; unusual lighting fixtures and elegant faucets; furniture-style cabinetry and built-ins; and paint colors to create a homey feel.

“Buyers don’t have to put energy into making their new house feel like home,” she says. She also builds her houses to Energy Star standards. The lower operating costs benefit buyers now and in the future. “When people resell their houses – and everybody sells at some point – lower operating costs will give them a very big edge.”

In the end, it only takes one buyer, who loves this and can live with that and down the road may change the other thing.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all when buying a home,” Rushin said. “Everything depends on the goals of the buyer.”

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Carol Ann Zinn, founder of Zinn Design Build in Chapel Hill creates warmth in her home designs with job-built trim, as opposed to factory-built; unusual lighting fixtures and elegant faucets; furniture-style cabinetry and built-ins; and paint colors to create a homey feel.

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