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As home prices fall, architectural firms create new standards

East Bay Business Times - by [Sarah Thailing](#) East Bay Business Times contributor

The subprime mortgage crisis is having more than just a financial effect on the home-building industry, shaking also the very foundations of residential design.

The name of the game these days for architects and home builders alike is flexibility, and there are many changes ready to hit the drawing boards. The living room, for example, soon may be extinct, after a long battle for floor space with the great room or the family room. And the formal dining room is on the endangered list, along with grand foyers, which may be scaled back in the years ahead.

Call it the Darwinism of design. Once the home market rebounds and construction resumes, new homes will evolve, offering more-flexible floor plans, better energy efficiency and a greater connection with the outdoors.

Eye-popping home price appreciation is a thing of the past, and East Bay homeowners now realize they can't trade up to a bigger, better house every few years.

"People now recognize that they may be staying in their home for an extended period of time," said Bob Hidey, president of **Robert Hidey Architects** in San Ramon, which does the majority of architectural work for Shapell Homes and is the architect for the upcoming residential developments of Wilder in Orinda and Palos Colorados in Moraga. "We are developing floor plan configurations that are much more flexible and meet the needs of a changing lifestyle. This lets homeowners use the space differently as their family matures and children move out."

For example, a room that opens onto the great room could serve as a dining room at first. Later, it might become a home office, an exercise room or a grandparent's bedroom. With formal spaces disappearing, a flexible floor plan gives owners an array of possibilities.

Less is more

New homes are going to get smaller but more efficient, said Chip Pierson, principal and general manager of Pleasanton-based **Dahlin Group Architecture Planning**. Nationwide, the average single-family home completed in 2007 was 2,512 square feet, well over double its humble average of



983 square feet in 1950. In 2015, new homes will average between 2,300 and 2,500 square feet, predicts Gopal Ahluwalia, vice president of research for the Washington, D.C.-based **National Association of Home Builders**.

"All of this is the result of higher land costs, higher construction costs and less discretionary income," Hidey points out.

The good news is that a small house can feel bigger with the right design. New homes will have a direct relationship to the outdoors, in many cases thanks to more glass. Gone are the traditional front yard and backyard, said Hidey. Instead, homes in a variety of price ranges will feature covered outdoor spaces that give owners more living area - and outdoor rooms to furnish. Designs might have a front courtyard with a low or high wall for privacy. A C-shaped house might revolve around a central courtyard that opens onto a side yard. Or a covered courtyard might be in the back.

"Home builders are bringing inside and outside spaces together," said Cindy Siwecki, vice president of marketing and research for the Alamo-based **Reiser Group**, which is a sales and marketing agency for residential-property developers and specializes in new-home sales. Slate floors, or ceramic tile floors that look like natural stone, will carry from the great room to the outside patio. "Bring the outside in, and you make your space feel bigger," she said. At the same time, interiors are going beyond beige and moving toward bolder colors.

Outdoor living is in

Outdoor features like porches and patios are increasingly common in newly built homes, according to the NAHB. Among upscale home buyers, fully equipped outdoor kitchens continue to be popular. In addition to top-of-the-line grills, luxury-home owners want outside sinks, cooking islands, refrigerators, beer dispensers and wine refrigerators. They also might add audio equipment, a TV, an outdoor fireplace and a pool or spa to complete their backyard oasis.

On the higher end, some new homes will come with a detached living space in the back. This might serve as living quarters for extended family, or a home office with more peace and quiet. The upscale home of the future may come with a fiber-optic network, a multi-room audio system, multi-room video access, a system that integrates security, lighting, heating and cooling, and a master bath with multiple shower heads, NAHB predicts. Make that two master bathrooms. In luxury homes, the demand for two master bedroom suites is on the rise.

Solar is hot

Green and sustainable building is not just a trend, but a new direction in architecture. By 2020, the **Home Builders Association of Northern California** has set a goal of reducing overall energy consumption in new homes by 50 percent from 1990 levels and aims to cut carbon emissions by 30 percent during the same time frame. The association also supports green building standards created by the Berkeley-based nonprofit Build It Green that exceed the state's current standards for energy-efficient construction.

Among other things, green building means better insulation, high-performance windows and more

efficient lighting and appliances. It has also increased the popularity of renewable materials, such as bamboo and cork flooring and kitchen countertops made of concrete or bits of recycled glass - some of which are priced at a premium. In some designs, deeper overhangs and sun shades will shield windows, and courtyards will improve ventilation.

Some architects say solar power will get hotter in the next decade. After tax rebates and incentives, photovoltaic cells might start at \$20,000 - an investment that owners can recoup through lower electric bills in seven to 10 years. A few new homes will come with solar panels, while others may offer them as an option. The question is whether home buyers will be willing to pay the price.

"All of these ideas are thousands of years old," said Rodney Friedman, president, CEO and executive design architect of Emeryville-based **Fisher-Friedman Architects**. "The difference is that some enabling technologies are available today to help us design a better shelter." Friedman believes home buyers will go solar not necessarily because it is energy conscious, but because it will make economic sense. "The consumer is going to look at his utility bills and \$4 gas and say, 'I can have a house that's 500 square feet larger if it has photovoltaic cells.' Buyers will buy the biggest home they think they can finance. It's part of a natural desire to have a larger dwelling."