Architecture trends 2013

Adrian Zenere, director of Archizen Architects, gives an architect's-eye view on current design and building trends

Although the global financial crisis has affected Australia much less than other countries, it nevertheless has affected the attitudes of Australians when it comes to home design. While they still demand quality, professional service and design individuality for their principle asset, many are now asking their architect to design their family home with an eye towards affordability and flexibility.

Many Australians contemplating a renovation or building a new home are no longer looking for the 'McMansions' of the past and extravagant items that were once seen as 'must-haves' are becoming less popular. Instead, reflecting their ongoing concern about the economy, Australians have become more budget-conscious and have fewer items on their wish lists. "Luxury" individual-function rooms, such as home theatres, exercise rooms and hobby rooms, are no longer seen as essential and are now being integrated into other multi-purpose areas.

Clients are asking us to design unique, comfortable homes, optimising opportunities for light, air, space and views with an eye towards how their families will live in the dwelling into the future. They are demanding cost-effective, sustainable solutions that are practical and have flexible floorplans, to accommodate elderly parents or "boomerang" kids who may return as adults to live in their parents' homes. Consequently, we strive to combine the possibilities inherent in each unique site with practical layouts and the creative use of materials, to achieve a desirable family home with visual beauty and maximum utility, all with an eye towards affordability.

COST-EFFECTIVE DESIGNS

With continuing concerns about the global economy and rising energy bills, architects are finding now, more than ever, that clients want cost-effective designs. Most are sensibly not prepared to overextend themselves financially in this climate, but instead are demanding value for money and clever, efficient designs.

Today, home layouts increasingly need to flow internally with no wasted space, using efficient planning and attention to detail, to reduce both building costs and ongoing energy costs. Gone are the days where homes were designed with huge voids that are difficult to heat or cool. With Australians preferring a more casual

lifestyle, the formal dining room has become a thing of the past. Oversized homes are now increasingly being recognised as being expensive to build and, importantly, expensive to run.

However, open-plan living remains popular. Removing unnecessary walls such as those creating hallways can reduce the overall building costs and, with clever design, extra living space may be created where the unusable hallway once stood. Innovative design solutions by professional registered architects can optimise space after considering the opportunities and limitations of the site, together with the client's lifestyle, while remaining conscious of budgets and timescales.

MULTI-PURPOSE DESIGNS

One of the keys that Archizen uses to create value for our clients is designing homes that have the flexibility and versatility to meet their family's changing needs should they remain in that home as they age.

A prominent home design trend is the need for more versatile floor plans. Our architectural clients in particular are requesting rooms in their homes that are able to serve more than one purpose. For example, a bedroom-sized room can function as a study, home office, media room, sleeping accommodation for guests, exercise or hobby room or whatever individual needs the occupants have. Multi-purpose areas are flexibly designed to serve the family's specific requirements as their situation changes.

Kitchens continue to serve as the home's nerve centre and the family gathering place. Workstations and recharging areas for electronic devices close to the kitchen and living areas are popular, so parents can monitor their children while they're doing their homework or on the internet. These resource stations are also in a convenient location to pay bills and organise families.

Sliding doors and partitions can be used to improve functionality and divide or open up internal areas, and have now become a common feature of the home floorplan. This flexibility helps improve the functionality of the home, allowing it to expand to accommodate activities such as gatherings of the extended family at special occasions.

A popular continuing trend is the outdoor living room, where the backyard, landscaped garden or courtyard becomes an

extension of the internal living areas, with large glazed doors opening onto terraces and decks.

MULTI-GENERATIONAL FAMILY LIVING

As Australians are living longer and remaining in their homes as they age, we have noticed that the most popular emerging design trend is the desire for multigenerational floorplans, allowing each generation the option to retreat to their personal space or to share social time with the family. It is no longer unusual for more than one generation to share the family home, with granny flats or self-contained apartments with private entrances being incorporated into new designs.

With clever design, these flexible "zoned" layouts can be used to accommodate aging parents and adult kids who return home; alternatively, they may be rented out for additional income. With rising land prices, some families are also asking for duplex designs, where the older generation resides on the ground floor to avoid climbing stairs and the younger generation resides on the upper level.

As many people age they are demanding the ability to live independently in their own homes, among their friends and familiar surroundings. Many are having their residences adapted for accessible senior living rather than move into aged care facilities. Low-maintenance and accessibility are becoming priorities, with many considering ramps and elevators instead of stairs, and larger showers and bathrooms for easier wheelchair access should they need it in the future.

SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHIER DESIGNS:

The inclusion of green elements is a high priority and will continue to be so into the future, not only for their environmental impact but also as a counter-balance to rising energy costs. However, as much as solar panels, fluorescent light bulbs, water tanks and efficient shower heads can reduce energy and water costs, an ecologically sustainable home designed using passive environmental principles by a registered architect will have a much greater effect.

Another emerging trend is for healthier and safer homes. Health-aware homeowners are beginning to see their homes as part of their "wellness" equation, alongside exercise and eating the right foods. Indeed an increasing number of owners are planting their gardens and courtyards with herbs, vegetables and fruit trees instead of, or alongside, their ornamental plants.

As some homes can potentially make people sick with synthetic materials and chemical products such as paints, laminate glues and timber varnishes, these products are increasingly being replaced by low-VOC (volatile organic compound) paints, stains and sealants, along with cabinets and furniture made with natural products.

It is staggering that around 600,000 people a year are injured in their homes, including 320,000 children and 100,000 seniors. Therefore, designing to minimise the potential for accidents and injuries is a sensible precaution and increasingly a design trend. Features that homeowners should look at include toddler-proof doors, safer stair layouts, safety lighting, low-maintenance roofs and guttering and non-slip floor surfaces.

A practising architect for more than 25 years, Adrian Zenere is a director of Archizen Architects, based in Sydney. Archizen is a boutique architectural practice focusing on contemporary small to medium-sized projects. For more information contact Archizen Architects on (02) 9546 8988 or info@archizen.com.au