

WOW

FACTOR

Consumers open their wallets for upgrades with impact

BY TED MCINTYRE

VENTURING FAR BEYOND creature comfort and into the realm of creature grandeur, an increasing number of homeowners are dipping deep into their pocketbooks to design the home of their dreams.

Recent luxury home sales prove that point. In the Greater Toronto Area, annual upper-end residential sales (\$1.5 million+) have leapt a staggering 147% since 2009—from 774 units to 1,908—and 18% from 2012 to 2013 alone.

Is this momentum going to continue? “With the same sound (economic) underpinnings in place, 2014 is well positioned to match and possibly eclipse 2013’s record performance,” notes the 2014 RE/MAX Upper End Market Trends Report. Last year could easily be dubbed “the year of the luxury home,” notes the annual review, which looked at sales activity in 16 major centres across the country. The numbers were revealing. In 2013, 75% of major markets reported sales above year-ago levels, including Hamilton-Burlington (+34%), Kitchener-Waterloo (27%), Greater Toronto (18%), St. John’s (7%) and London-St. Thomas (5%). More than two-thirds of Canadian markets shattered existing records for the number of upper-end transactions in a single year. Since 2009, luxury home sales in half of the country’s major markets have more than doubled or tripled—and in one instance quadrupled.

For some high-end buyers, better doesn’t necessarily mean bigger, though. Some are investing in smaller homes, but with higher-quality design and more luxury upgrades and amenities. That bodes well for builders, renovators, interior designers and suppliers of home goods.

The following renovations demonstrate the lengths to which some homeowners are willing to go to pamper themselves without ever having to step outside.



In a high-end cellar, every element has been carefully planned, says Papro's Janice Bednarz.

Upgrade to a higher vintage

If your client wants to announce to guests that they have exceptional taste, few things make that statement quite like a handsome wine cellar. But what separates a standard wine cellar from one that truly leaves wine lovers dropping their jaws in awe? "It all depends on the client's choice of wine racking, features and finishes," says Janice Bednarz of Papro Wine Cellars & Consulting in Toronto, which has installed residential cellars with costs ranging into six figures and storage capacities of up to 5,000 bottles. "Standard wine cellars tend to be made of wood—typically redwood—with a simple rounded arch and shelving designed for maximum storage. In other words, they're more about quantity than aesthetics. Luxurious cellars, on the other hand, are all about creating a stunning showpiece. They use more sophisticated racking, such as the Cable Wine System or acrylic systems, and more exotic woods, such as Wenge or Sapele mahogany.

"A high-end cellar can also be recognized by the fact that every element of the space has been carefully planned, sourced and selected in order to remain true and authentic to the theme or era of the desired design," Bednarz adds. "They typically incorporate a wider variety of features—for example, angled or horizontal displays, floating shelves, humidors, etc.—and natural materials like onyx, granite and other types of stone."

And never underestimate the importance of the right lighting plan, says Bednarz. "A cellar that includes a combination of ambient, task and accent lighting in order to create the appropriate impact and ambience can make anyone say, 'Wow!' It's one of the reasons why glassed-in wine cellars have become increasingly popular with luxury home or establishment owners—so that the beauty is more visible."



No feature was spared in this exquisite 18'x36' free-form indoor oasis by Betz Pools.

In the swim of things

Many homes have pools; precious few have the indoor variety. The details of these aqua-indulgences can include retractable glass enclosures and custom designed mosaic mural designs throughout the entire pool bottom and sides. But it starts with the hardware. "If the pool is \$100,000 and the HVAC is \$150,000, you're looking at a quarter-million before you even build the structure that houses it," says Mark Wideman of Betz Pools in Whitchurch-Stouffville.

While Wideman has been on site for a \$600,000 project, he knows of some that have topped out at \$3 million.

"Recent trends include automatic covers, which give people the ability to control the humidity more by locking it in, versus using the Dry-O-Tron dehumidification system to take it out," says Wideman. "We're doing one in Collingwood where you can see through the cover to expose the lighting underneath it. It's a big post-and-beam room. In the summertime, he has nano doors that open up to the outside deck, giving him more control of how he uses the pool."

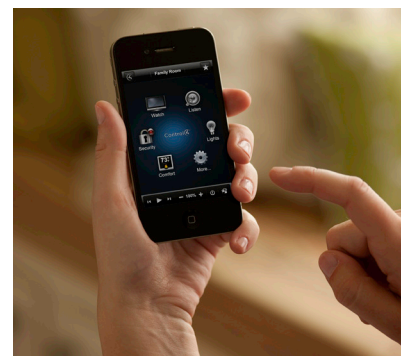
The most challenging construction? That would be a lap pool in Muskoka that opens up in the summertime to extend to a length of 25 metres. "That was a one-of-a-kind project, and in the top five for difficulty, because it has a summer and winter water level," Wideman notes. "The whole pool was insulated, as well as the floor. And there are separate systems for the inside and outside pool."

Really smart homes

Some homes are "smart;" others deserve PhDs. Perhaps a half-hour before your client wakes up in the morning, they'd like the thermostat to heat up the house, and for the lights to slowly brighten and the shades to gradually open. As they leave for work, they push one button to lock all the doors, arm the security system, power down all non-essential devices and adjust the temperature settings to the "away" mode. While they're at work, the system sends them a text message if their child has not returned home from school by the expected time, or if the gaming system has been in use for more than an hour, or if there is a water leak detected in the laundry room.

This is UrbanHippo's specialty. Operating out of the Hamilton/Burlington/Guelph area, its list of home-building partners include Brant-haven, DeSantis, Losani, Fusion and Gemini. And while the company estimates an average consumer spend of \$20,000 to \$40,000 (including four to six security cameras) to set up a standard \$600,000 to \$800,000 production home, Urban Hippo has been tasked with home automation projects up to \$200,000," acknowledges co-founder Vince Greco.

The list of options goes on and on—\$160-per-light-switch and \$1,200-per-7"-touchscreen at a time. Of course, there are eco-friendly savings galore to be realized, as well as a significant bolstering of home security. But what truly inspires is the ability to monitor and operate virtually anything electric in a home from anywhere in the world that you can pick up a wifi signal.





Digital Golf is paying a commission to anyone providing a lead toward installation.



Garage Living even installs four-post vehicle lifts to double your parking space.

Coming up aces

While modern big-screen TVs can make you feel as though you're perched right on the golf course, nothing beats actually getting to swing a club. Today's digital simulators offer striking reality, from the visual backdrops of some of the world's most famous courses, to the sounds of playing on those tracks—even the murmurs and applause of tournament crowds. They also produce remarkably accurate shot renderings, thanks to high-tech software such as the 3Trak system from aboutGolf, which captures multiple images of the club and ball in just a metre of length, producing the industry's most accurate club and ball data.

Offering voice control and frame-by-frame swing analysis, aboutGolf's all-new aG Portal (a first in the golf simulator industry) allows a wide range of access through the simulator, whether watching movies, streaming content, playing games or conducting business—all from one enormous screen—even *while* playing golf!

For clients looking to augment their residences with such technology, Kingston-based Digital Golf has simplified the process. An official Canadian dealer of aboutGolf products, Digital Golf pays a commission (starting at \$1,000) to custom builders, sales agents or whomever provides a lead. The builder has the added opportunity to up-charge for extra ceiling height (11 feet is optimal), hard walls, bar areas, etc. And since everything Digital Golf produces is customized, the company's design department can take any schematics and advise what can fit where. Spare requirements depend on the model ordered, although the company recommends a minimum of 450 square feet up to 600 square feet.

"In our experience, for higher-end homes, 15%-20% of clients would strongly consider this as an add-on to their rec room," claims Craig Card of Digital Golf, whose simulators start at \$45,000 and range upward to \$85,000 for the aG Curve model.

Driving to new heights

For most automobiles, a garage is a storage facility. For the lucky ones, it's a suite at the Ritz. Aaron Cash, founder and partner of Garage Living Inc. in Vaughan, is responsible for such transformations. His company covers everything from consultation and design to junk removal, painting, drywall, insulation, concrete and electrical, and much in between. They even install four-post, certified vehicle and storage lifts for clients looking to double their parking space or simply store an expensive summer toy.

While a typical complete Garage Living project ranges in the \$7,500-\$15,000 ballpark, they do venture into the \$150,000 realm. "We can take a project from the bare studs to a completely finished space," says Cash. "But in this case (the project pictured), we were given the space after the drywall was primed. It included custom steel cabinetry with a fitted unit on the back wall and an inset recycling station on the left wall, stainless Diamond Plate wainscoting, PVC wall organizers with custom colour accents and Rhino Floortex coating."



H2 Systems in Burlington averages one \$400,000 home theatre project a year.

Theatre of the mind

“Remember that old Maxell commercial, where the guy’s being blown out of his chair?” asks Brad Boyle of Signature Audio Video in Stittsville. The Ottawa HBA’s 2012 Best Basement Reno winner enjoys creating that type of A/V experience. “I think this is the Golden Age of home theatres—dedicated home entertainment rooms,” says Boyle. “We get a lot of people telling us they haven’t gone out to a movie all year; they have better sound and video than AMC theatres.”

So does Clinton Howell of H2 Systems in Burlington. H2 has a new Experience Centre that allows customers and clients to move through a range of high-end speakers, enabling them to not only hear but feel the distinct difference—particularly in the company’s “WOW” theatre room, with its Sony 4K (4 x regular HDMI resolution) projector and a 150” micro-perforated screen with huge, concealed speakers breathing through it like a T-Rex. Or perhaps your client would prefer H2’s Planar 84-inch 4K LED TV for \$26,000?

“There’s even a personal IMAX-branded home theatre for \$2 million,” adds Boyle.

Incorporating premium electronics options, such as McIntosh or Bowers & Wilkins speakers, can see a residential audio-video system climb into six figures in the blink of an eye. Howell figures H2 averages one \$400,000-\$500,000 project a year, such as the home theatre it created in southeast Oakville, right down to its

seven speakers and two subwoofers. But if you want to hear something truly outrageous, put your ear to H2’s Steinway Lyngdorf Model D speakers, which are \$400,000 a pair! “Best speakers in the world,” Howell says. One would hope.

Just before Christmas, FM Audio Video in Brantford completed a roughly \$150,000 project in a 26,000-square-foot home in Brant County that featured multiple TVs and 26 pairs of invisible speakers—built into the wall and specially plastered, they are concealed from the naked eye.

In Ottawa, Signature had a recent project that incorporated a 132” CinemaScope screen, multi-tiered seating, a 7.2 THX-certified speaker setup (all of which are hidden from view) and acoustic treatments that enhance audio and soundproof the surroundings to such a degree that you could hear a centipede stub a foot on the other side of the room.

It’s not always over-the-top high-end components, though, says Howell. “Sometimes, it’s sheer volume: a couple dozen TVs, three or four surround-sound systems, touch-screen controls, surveillance cameras, and a home theatre with overhead and under-seat lighting with a bar built in.”

While money is often not a factor for many of these homeowners, builders should offer homeowners the option for entertainment or integration solutions before the drywall has gone up, suggests Matt Scott of Omega Audio Video in London. “We’re coming in after the fact—once a reno is already done or a new build is complete—and then ripping up new drywall to provide solutions the homeowner wants but was never offered. It will cost the homeowner at least twice as much in labour costs at that point.

“We want to make the home builder look better,” Scott says. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s no different than finding a company to design and build the kitchen during the construction process. This is 2014. Everyone has a smartphone. Everyone wants to be able to turn on the TV or adjust the lights. It all comes down to solving solutions for the homeowner. And bringing the builder into that process earlier can only help.

“We work hand in hand with renovators, and help them create sales pitches for their jobs,” adds Signature’s Boyle. “But we would also like to be part of the discussion earlier in the process.”

LUXURY BY DESIGN

BIG HOMES adorned with expensive furniture and augmented with lavish renovations are often a reflection of one's tax bracket. But it's the interior design that gives those with means the opportunity to truly personalize their surroundings. Since its establishment in 1987, Flora Di Menna Designs has been catering to those details. A multiple award winner—including a 2012 OHBA Award of Distinction—the Vaughan-based firm combines its artistry, comprehensive planning services and custom furnishings to a range of clients.

And there's no shortage of customers who can afford to express themselves. "Today we're seeing that more people are concerned about living in the moment; so cost is secondary," says Di Menna, whose portfolio includes a \$10 million project at National Estates in Woodbridge, as well as "integrating a client's helipad within his glass-enclosed parking court, which is on a hillside attached to his house in St. Lucia."

Some of Di Menna's extravagant detailing can be seen in latticed room dividers; longer, wider textured hardwood planks; porcelain wall and floor tiles (up to 48" wide) designed in mosaic murals; spa rooms with raised floors and sunken therapeutic Asian tubs; glass-enclosed cases to house humidors, cognacs and fine stemware; kitchens with rolling ladders to reach upper cabinets and LED lights in cutlery drawers and other cabinet areas—all of which open and close with a mere touch.



An elevator can increase property value by 10%, according to Federal Elevator.

An uplifting experience

Builders and contractors don't need to be reminded of the aging-in-place trend among homeowners. So for those with accessibility concerns—and who can afford it—a residential elevator is a great way to "future-proof" a home.

Apart from addressing mobility and ease of access—perhaps even offering a quick trip to the attic or basement to transport holiday decorations—"an elevator can increase the value of a property by 10% and add uniqueness that will set the home apart from other listings," claims Florence Facchini, business development manager with Mississauga-based Federal Elevator.

"Although an elevator can be added through a renovation, it's much easier for builders to include it in the design process," notes Facchini, whose products usually range from \$20,000 to \$25,000, including installation and warranty.

For those who want to leave space for future installation, the keys for builders are "to ensure that stacked closets or alcoves are included on all levels, which makes it easy to transform this space into an elevator hoistway when the need arises," advises the company. "Builders should also rough in all of the elevator's electrical needs, create an 8"-minimum pit at the lowest level of the home (covered with false flooring until it is required) and ensure that there are no load-bearing beams in the areas where the elevator has been roughed in."

While the style of hardware is limited to two options—hydraulic drive, which requires a machine room, or traction drive, which doesn't—the design options can be extensive, from recessed wood panelling and bronze control panels to clear doors and a bevy of finishes to match any home's decor.

If your customer really wants their elevator to be the focal point of their home, you can bypass the more common interior swing door or powered sliding door in favour of "fully automatic stainless steel doors, similar to that of a passenger elevator," explains Steve Zadel of Motion Elevating in East York.