

Suburban residents embrace urban design

By BARBARA METZ
Special to the Daily Transcript

Urban style — the clean, edgy, eclectic look that has defined chic downtown living — is migrating to the suburbs.

"We're seeing a strong demand for dual-use furniture, multi-use rooms, clean contemporary furniture and uncluttered spaces, which are all hallmarks of urban design," said Jaimi Julian Thompson, president of Artisan Design Group. "We used to have two portfolios to show prospective clients: one 'urban' for our downtown clients, and one 'traditional/transitional' for our suburban clients. The trend is so strong that we've combined them."

Thompson, who established the first urban design showroom in San Diego in 2004, points to several factors accelerating the trend. "Urban style, as portrayed in the media, is young and hip, and a segment of the population wants to embrace that look no matter where they are living," she said.

"Additionally, certain people are downsizing, by choice or necessity. There is also a movement toward a simpler, eco-friendly lifestyle. On a more macro level, there is the dual challenge of rapidly increasing building costs coupled with decreasing inventories of land for residential development," she explained.

"Most of these factors lead to smaller living spaces, making urban design the ideal solution."

Designers who know how to enable condo dwellers to thrive in 600 square feet have myriad space planning tricks and ingenious ideas that maximize every inch.

"These same solutions often work in suburban settings," Thompson said. "It is common in urban condos to create guest room/office combinations that incorporate Murphy beds and modular or built-in office furniture. The same ideas work beautifully in secondary bedrooms in the suburbs."

Both urban and suburban clients tend to prefer what Thompson calls "soft contemporary."

"People may like ultra hard-edge modern design in model homes or museum settings, but when it actually comes to designing their own home, the great majority of people opt for a softer look that still incorporates clean lines, uncluttered spaces and a strong personal component.

They want their home to be a comfortable haven," she said.

The clean lines of urban design provide a receptive palette for homeowners to express themselves. It invites people to explore color, mix styles and bring in ethnic accessories, rustic pottery, antique pieces or whatever may be their current passion.

Thompson consults with homebuilders and design centers throughout the country. Today she is leading Artisan Design Group's seventh annual National Design Forum for design center personnel here in San Diego.

Urban design reaches its full expression in the kitchen, according to Thompson. By concentrating on the effective use of space, smart storage solutions, cutting-edge appliances and the latest eco-friendly products, small kitchens can be more functional and aesthetically pleasing than huge, oversized kitchens.

For instance, space-conscious Leibherr refrigeration units from Germany have the highest Energy Star rating and are the most eco-friendly refrigerators on the market, according to Thompson. They offer an array of storage possibilities with five distinct temperature zones and can include wine storage areas within the refrigerator or as a separate built-in unit.

Other luxurious urban-style amenities include Miele coffee centers that brew espresso drinks individually, Fisher-Paykel drawer dishwashers and GE Monogram ovens that provide multiple cooking options: convection cooking, microwave, warming and "Speedcook," which bakes eight times faster than conventional baking.

In downtown condos, the kitchens are almost always an extension of the living areas, Thompson said, so the kitchens must also be beautiful and contribute to the aesthetics of the home.

"The good news is that the budget goes farther when you're dealing with small spaces. Clients can more easily afford exotic woods, exquisite hand-made tiles or custom quartz counters because they are only purchasing a relatively small amount," she said.

The same principles apply to urban-size baths. "We call them jewel boxes," said Thompson, "because many urban baths are only nine-by-seven feet. Here again, we

make the most of a small space by using exquisite materials and high-style components, but the size keeps down the ultimate cost. The beauty of small space design is you don't have to compromise."

Whether designing Tierrasanta residences or downtown condos, Thompson sees soft contemporary as a look with staying power because it appeals to so many market segments.

"The clean, simple lines appeal to 20-somethings all the way through baby boomers and retirees. They may select vastly different art, accessories and color to personalize their space, but the underlying concept stays the same.

Metz is the principal of Metz Public Relations of San Diego.

Source Code: 20090924crd



Photo: Gail Owens Photography

Urban style is now a popular choice of old and young, whether they live in the city or the suburbs. The style is characterized by clean, straight lines, ethnic and/or personal accessories, dual-use furniture, multi-use rooms and uncluttered spaces.