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Great Design is Recession-Proof

By Orren Pickell, Orren Pickell Designers & Builders

When stocks, bonds and commodities are not delivering, what design trends are worth the cost for your clients? When the market is down, homeowners investing in real-estate will trend toward quality. Smart custom builders will maximize tighter budgets by offering great design.

The contemporary household continues to demand comfortable and multifunctional common areas. Clients are not interested in oversized or non-functional rooms. Savvy builders will offer detailing, an increasingly popular option to enhance a home's interior space, with rich finishes, crown moldings, millworks and custom cabinetry. Elaborate amenities, from Olympic-size pools to formal dining rooms, are no longer necessarily desirable. "Quarterly rooms" — those used only a few times a year — are on the chopping block, even for the wealthiest families.

We put these lessons into action when developing our latest concept home, the Scottish Manor, located in an upscale Chicago suburb. The bones of the house are of exceptional quality. Features include stone flooring, a mahogany spiral staircase in the entry, limestone fireplaces and two master suites. But budget-conscious homeowners do not want to pay for technology that doesn't serve their daily lives. The technology in the Scottish Manor is high-end but practical; in the basement, for example, a large mirror disguises an LCD television, visible only when turned on. Customizable light settings are hidden by elegant wainscot paneling.

Builders will also find green construction top of mind for new clients, though

many hesitate to invest in expensive green materials. But good design can elegantly incorporate your clients' green goals. "Passive" architecture such as strategically placed windows are just one of many design solutions that avoids extra cost. Also, some builders think that sustainable products such as cork flooring look and

plumbing and millwork finishes.

Many custom builders don't have the resources to employ architects or designers full time, but great design affects your reputation and your bottom line. That means you may need to contract with larger or freelance firms for certain projects. Mobilize your network by serving in industry organ-



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feel cheap. Some builders might write off green brands as inappropriate for upscale homes. A good architect, however, knows how to find green products with extraordinary finishes.

The era in which builders might replicate the structure of a house from previous years, packing it full of amenities, has passed. But if you aren't on the cutting edge of design, your business risks becoming a commodity and sales come down to a price war. At our firm, we employ half a dozen architects that hone the style, shape and flow of rooms. Our kitchen and bath specialists pay attention to countertops,

izations, such as the local home builders association. Through creative design solutions, custom builders must push to deliver the latest and greatest for their clients. The result is a residence designed either for a lifetime of enjoyment or ready resale. ■

Orren Pickell is president and chief executive officer of Orren Pickell Designers & Builders in Lincolnshire, Ill. Over the past 33 years, Pickell has established the company as one of the leading custom-home design/build firms in the Chicago area, winning more than 170 awards for excellence in design, construction and innovation.