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The hottest remodeling trends for 2011

You'll get the most out of your dollar by keeping an eye on what shows up in high-end homes. It's the difference between Harvest Gold and rich wood.

By Liz Pulliam Weston



If you want to get the maximum value from your remodel when you sell your home, you need to pay attention to trends. But not just today's fads: what's more important is what will be hot when it's time to put your house on the market.

Home improvements, after all, start to date the moment they're completed. How fast their value slides may depend on your ability to forecast what will appeal to future buyers. Guess right, and the remodel you do today can look almost as cutting edge five or even 10 years from now. Guess wrong, and you've just spent thousands on the avocado-green, shag-carpeted, conversation pit turn-off of the future.

To navigate this minefield, keep in mind the following:

- [Rid your home of 'popcorn' ceilings](#)
- [Is carpet dead?](#)
- [Building permits pay off for sellers](#)
- [Have you overimproved your home?](#)

High-end homes drive the remodeling market. About 90% of the growth in remodeling industry over the last decade was, according to Harvard University's [Joint Center for Housing Studies](#), fueled by high-end homeowners (defined as those with houses worth \$400,000 or more in 2003 dollars). The trends hatched in this market tend to percolate down to the middle market, said remodeling expert Jim Lapides of the National Association of Home Builders' [Remodelers Council](#), and eventually are incorporated into the new-home market. So, if you want to know what will be in vogue in your neighborhood five years out, tour some open houses in more affluent communities to see what's happening there now.

Boomers are big, but GenXers are growing. Boomers own more of the housing stock and spend more on remodeling than other groups. But the cohort just behind them -- those born from 1965 to 1974 -- is coming on fast, according to Harvard's housing center. While aging boomers may be looking to downsize and make their lives easier, midlife GenXers might be looking for more space to handle growing families. If you want your house to appeal to the largest number of buyers, you may have to think about features that appeal to both groups.

Durability is key. Investing in quality materials can pay off if they hold up well over the years, said interior designer Juliana Catlin, past president of the [American Society of Interior Designers](#) and owner of Catlin Interiors in Jacksonville, Fla. A cheap surface might show so many gouges and dings after five years that a buyer will insist you pay for replacing it, while a well-chosen stone or tile surface could still be adding value a decade from now.

Consider the next buyer. One of the big trends in remodeling, particularly among GenXers, is making a personal statement, said Joan Stephens, chairman of the [National Association of the Remodeling Industry](#) and owner of Stronghold Remodeling in Boise, Idaho. These homeowners don't want their kitchens or baths to look like anyone else's; they might invest big bucks in, say, custom glass-tile designs or bold-colored countertops.

But Catlin worries these personal statements will date quickly and alienate future buyers. "You have to think how it's going to translate for the next owners," Catlin said. "You may love your dark green countertop, but the next owner's favorite color could be yellow."

That's why Catlin advises homeowners who care about resale to choose more neutral colors for floors, countertops and other hard surfaces, using easily changeable paint and accessories to infuse personality.

Catlin also cautions against structural changes that can permanently devalue your home, like eliminating a bedroom or removing a tub from a bathroom (thus converting it from an all-important "full" bath to a three-quarters version).

Another tip: make your remodel more timeless by matching it to the style of your home. "A cottage-style home looks better with a cottage-style kitchen," Catlin said. "A Mediterranean kitchen looks better in a Mediterranean home." Be particularly cautious of any remodel that's a sharp contrast; an ultra-modern kitchen can look great if the rest of your house is sleek and uncluttered, but can look like a space ship landed if the rest of your home is shabby chic.

In the kitchen

Highly polished granite and stainless steel were the hot trends in the 1990s -- so much so that now there's a backlash among high-end homeowners. Instead of gleam, remodelers are going for warmth, Stephens said

Color is hot right now, as in bright-red enameled stoves. But color trends are tricky to navigate, so a more conservative but still trendy choice might be panels that help refrigerators and dishwashers blend in with the cabinetry.

Higher-end appliances are also in big demand, Lapidis said. Remodelers may not spend \$6,000 on commercial-grade appliances, but they certainly want an upgrade from the entry level.

Stone countertops are still popular of course, but more homeowners are becoming wary of the drawbacks, said Vince Butler, chairman of the Remodelers Council. (Granite and other natural stones can be permanently stained by cooking oils and etched by common cleaners.) Butler said he is installing more synthetic or engineered stone countertops and seeing renewed interest in "solid surfaces" like Corian.

"It may not have the eye appeal [of granite] but I think as people live with it, it may be easier to take care of," Butler said.

Some, though, wonder if the monster/gourmet kitchen trend might begin to peter out, particularly among homes designed to appeal to older boomers.

"I think in the future people are going to be tired of cooking," said syndicated columnist and former builder Tim Carter, whose AsktheBuilder.com site focuses on remodeling as well as new construction issues. "It doesn't make much sense to invest \$100,000 in a (kitchen remodel) if you don't cook that much."

For the frugal: The good news is that minor kitchen remodels actually seem to pay off better at resale time than major redos, at least according to Remodeling Magazine's annual Cost vs. Value survey (you can read about my reservations about this survey in "[Remodeling risks often outweigh rewards](#)"). Someone who spent an average \$14,913 refacing cabinets, replacing laminate countertops and installing new cooktop, oven and sink in 2005 would recoup an estimated 98.5% of the cost on average if the home sold within a year, whereas someone who spent \$81,552 on an upscale, tear-everything-out-and-replace-it remodel would recoup 84.8% on average. (Read more about cheap kitchen fix-ups [here](#).)

The bath

Utilitarian is out. Think spa -- as in lots of space, big soaking or whirlpool tubs, multiple shower heads or even steam attachments in the shower. Dual sinks are a given in master baths, and luxuries like heated floors and towel warmers are popular with upscale renovators. Many renovators are putting the toilet in a separate room or partitioned area.

Remodelers are also shelling out, big time, for custom tile, said Butler, who runs Butler Bros. remodeling company in Clifton, Va.

"It's the place where people are really expressing themselves," he said. "We've seen some master bathrooms where they spent \$20,000 just on tile, and these are not extremely expensive homes. These are middle-class homes."

Be careful about going overboard if your primary goal is boosting resale value, however. The remodeling survey found a midrange remodel costing \$10,499 would recoup 102.2% of its cost if the house sold within a year, while a more-elaborate \$26,052 renovation would bring back 93.2%.

For the frugal: Adding multiple shower heads to a shower typically costs just a few hundred dollars, making it one of the most economical ways to add a spa feel. Also, try to avoid moving fixtures, since that can add enormously to a project's cost.

Underfoot

Wood floors are still desirable, with bamboo becoming more popular. Tile is still a good choice for kitchens and baths, although concrete is being used more often (either stained or just sealed). In addition, high-end linoleum -- which sounds like an oxymoron, but isn't -- is being used in more fashionable homes.

For the frugal: Laminate flooring designed to look like wood can be less expensive and more durable than the real thing, but choose carefully: some of the products can look kind of cheesy, Carlin warned. If you have the real thing hiding under carpeting or other flooring, spring for refinishing to add real value to your home. (Read "[Is carpet dead?](#)" for more about flooring trends.)

Accessibility

Contractors polled by the [National Association of Home Builders](#) said universal design -- making homes more accessible for the elderly and disabled -- would be one of the top future trends in remodeling (second only to the ever-rising cost of labor). Since most folks want to "age in place," making sure they can get around their homes as they age will be increasingly important.

Of course, baby boomers don't want to be reminded they're getting old, so one way to tout accessible design is to point out how their parents can benefit when they visit.

"When you're selling to that demographic, you kind of skirt the issue," Stephens said.

Fortunately, most aspects of universal design involve fairly subtle changes that add little if any cost to a remodeling project. Wider hallways and doorways, for example, are aesthetically pleasing as well as more functional when you're maneuvering a wheelchair, walker or even a big piece of furniture. (Ever try to get a king-sized bed or monster couch through a narrow door?)

Step-in showers, with no lip or tub wall separating them from the rest of the bathroom, can add to that spa feeling, while the extra lighting that can help aged eyes also makes the house feel brighter and more desirable.

For more ideas, check out the resources at [AARP's site](#).

For the frugal: Again, universal design can be incorporated into virtually any remodel. Or you can tackle projects one by one, such as replacing regular doorknobs with lever-style handles, removing thresholds between rooms and adding better lighting.

Floor plans

Open is still in and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, design experts agree. Cooks don't want to be isolated in the kitchen, and open floor plans make even smaller homes feel roomier.

By contrast, the value of additions appears to be waning, at least according to the survey, which showed most projects that added square footage didn't pay off as well as other remodels. Carter, for one, expects that trend to continue if energy prices remain high.

"The cost to heat and cool a home in the future is going to be staggering," Carter predicted. "If we don't have any major improvements in insulation, the only way you're going to save money on heating and cooling is by having a smaller home."

For the frugal: Knocking down a few walls costs a lot less than adding square footage. If you're a do-it-yourselfer, though, make sure you're not destroying load-bearing walls.

Bonus rooms

Carter thinks retired baby boomers are going to want workshops and hobby rooms to pursue their leisure-time passions. Lapedes suggests that "Costco rooms" may be on the rise, as homeowners look for ways to store "all the 10-pound bags of pretzels they bought at Costco." The extra storage might be incorporated into a space that also serves as the laundry and mud rooms, Lapedes said.

In fact, incorporating more storage throughout the house is likely to pay off, since our propensity to acquire stuff is unlikely to abate in the next decade.

Catlin also sees more houses incorporating home offices, which traditionally haven't added as much value as other remodeling projects. One solution is to build the office into the closet of a guest room, so later occupants have the flexibility to use the space the way they want.

For the frugal: You probably won't want to build rooms devoted to a single use, but adding shelves or cabinets can be an inexpensive way to increase a room's functionality.

The high-tech home

Movies, video games and other content increasingly will be delivered via broadband, so Carter recommends installing conduit that can help future electricians run wires from wherever the cable or satellite enters to your house to the rooms where you have your computers and entertainment centers.

He also likes the idea of "electronics closets" to house all the home entertainment gear and minimize visual clutter. Sensors can be built into the wall above the TV screen to transmit your remote controls' signals to the gear in the closet.

Another wiring project that's hot, Stephens said, involves putting speakers throughout the house as well as outside.

For the frugal: Adding speaker wire is an inexpensive, if potentially messy, do-it-yourself job since you likely will be running wires through attics and crawlspaces. Adding conduit is cheap if you've already got walls torn open for other projects; otherwise, hold off.