

Think quality, energy savings and a simple touch when preparing a home for sale in a tough market

DAWN KLINGENSMITH

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Architecture or interior design that calls to mind better economic times might actually be turnoffs to homebuyers. Opulence is out.

Just try selling a mini-castle in this market. Real estate broker Marian Anthony, of Anthony Realty Group in San Diego, listed such a home, knowing it would be a tough sell.

"In this market, people aren't looking at it," Anthony says. "It's not seen as practical. It seems extravagant. People don't like to display evidence of wealth in their houses anymore."

They say everything's bigger in Texas, but demand there is shrinking for opulent homes, too.

"There are a lot of castle-like homes here, but they don't seem impressive anymore. They seem gaudier," says Dallas-based interior designer Elaine Williamson.

Soaring cathedral ceilings and whirlpool tubs that can accommodate Shamu aren't necessarily selling points. They are "bells and whistles," Williamson says, and while they used to be alluring, today's buyers find them unnecessary.

"There's no point in spending money on things you don't end up using," she says.

While whirlpool tubs aren't necessarily a liability, their popularity is waning, and they are no longer considered a must-have.

"Now, soaker or bubble tubs will do," says realtor Eileen Casey of Prudential Rubloff Properties in Chicago.

Luxury is out, eco-friendly is in. "Granite countertops and stainless steel appliances were very popular in the past," Casey adds. "But now more eco-friendly countertops and energy-saving appliances and fixtures are in, along with other eco-friendly choices.

"Energy costs are rising," Casey continues. "People are more interested in options that can save them money while also being gentle on the environment."

Homebuyers expect value, not rock-bottom pricing. They won't settle for shoddy construction or low-end materials. But "less is more" is the prevailing philosophy among buyers and owners alike.

"Most of my clients would rather have a smaller home with better-quality finishes than a large house with spec home amenities," says interior decorator Dana Wolter of

Birmingham, Ala.

Sellers of large homes should try to create an atmosphere where buyers can envision themselves having casual, intimate gatherings, Wolter says. Formal rooms can be uninviting if not off-putting.

The backyard should tie in visually with the interior and look like viable and welcoming living space.

"Many people want to utilize every square inch of their home," Wolter says.

Fussy or trendy design features should be switched out or played down. Buyers want classic features that will stand the test of time.

Declutter, but don't don't go overboard

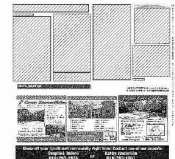
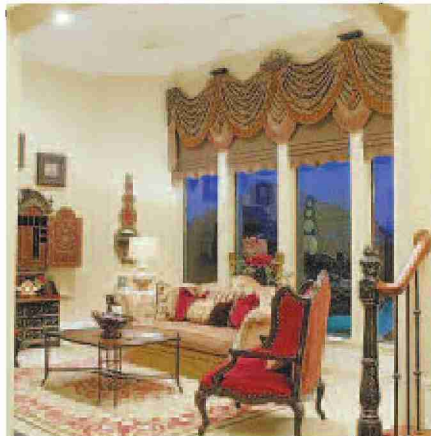
Mini-castle owners should not go to the extreme of tearing out their luxury amenities. Though they are not highly sought-after in today's market, those amenities befit the architecture.

However, sellers should evaluate their decor and consider clearing out accessories purchased simply to fill space. In any property and in any real estate market, clutter is a huge turnoff.

"Before placing your home on the market, bring in a fresh eye to help you clear stuff out," Wolter suggests. "What may not seem like clutter to you may appear as such to someone who has never been in your home."

Grand foyers that look as though their sole purpose is to impress rather than welcome guests should be made to feel warm and inviting. "This room sets the tone for the rest of the house," Wolter says.

Just say no to faux, Williamson urges. Faux



finishes on the wall can make a room look too showy, she says, and nowadays people want cleaner, calmer palettes.

Castle-like houses often become "theme-like," with Gothic elements like dark, heavy furniture and textured draperies and upholstery, Williamson says.

This makes for a dark atmosphere.

"Lighting in a home is extremely important," Wolter says. "If a home has wonderful natural light, accentuate this feature. If the home is dark, try to lighten it up with artificial lighting, lighter walls, or lighter upholstery or slipcovers."

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