

Residential design trends reflect generational preferences

Since March, most Americans have been spending more time at home. The results of this situation have created a massive demand on home improvement projects and caused even more disruption in an already strained materials supply chain (lumber, for instance, is at huge premium). Beyond tackling the “honey-do list” or upgrade project, people are rethinking their living spaces and, in many instances, asking them to do more. The living room, kitchen and bedroom now need to accommodate an office, classroom or exercise space. Virtual life is a commonality, yet virtual living seems to be the next frontier undiscovered. If so, how can designers create spaces that accommodate our multi-purpose lifestyle? More importantly, how can construction be as flexible as our devices?

These questions get more difficult when considering the varied needs of people depending on their stage of life. In a world that has become increasingly polarizing, it seems only natural that building design and construction follow suit. Driven by data and research, many developers are looking beyond the wants/needs of the traditional market and are instead looking specifically at generational differences among buyers. The millennial generation has become a hot topic for several years due to the sheer volume of those who were born between 1981 and 1996. This often misunderstood and highly characterized group of adults are now moving up in the workplace and are purchasing new homes or upgrading to their second. As with everything millennial, this group seems to have transcended previous generations in their buying patterns and preferences. Millennial dwellers often want multi-functional spaces and furnishes. A movable kitchen island that functions as a desk or table along with the ability to be tucked if needed. With their tendency to buck traditional norms and seek new ways of living, the design and construction sector must adapt quickly in order to capture this group at their peak buying age.

By contrast, Gen X’ers (ages 41-55) are more financially stable and seeking more showcase elements than their younger counterpart. According to a Boston.com article, 70% of this group works from home at least one day a week. This equates to some level of need for a workspace. While the millennial group seeks to maximize smaller spaces, the Gen X group is looking for more defined space for their work area. This space can often transition to an exercise room or playroom as well.

Another generation group that often gets a lot of focus is the baby boomers or active adults as they’re commonly referred to in marketing campaigns. This group — the parents of the millennials — are also entering a unique period in their lives, often looking to downsize in order to enjoy more. Perhaps obvious, this group tends to be the most financially secure and has more spending power. Despite their desire for downsizing space, Boomers want luxury and will express that in higher end materials. In addition to luxury, this group wants more casual and informal spatial layouts that can accommodate various entertaining opportunities. This presents itself in more comfortable furniture and multipurpose tables so the space can transition from study to happy hour seamlessly.

According to “What Buyers Really Want” (2019 Edition), almost 25% of millennials seek homes in an urban location. This number is significant when considering that only about 10% of Gen X and Baby Boomer buyers seek urban areas. This same survey revealed that buyers of all ages are primarily interested in home storage solutions (such as pantries & mudrooms) as well as outdoor



Jason Streb

patios. An overwhelming number of people (86%) want open concept living that combines the kitchen and dining space in one large room. What seems consistent for all age groups is that spaces need to be flexible and adapt to accommodate a variety of uses. Open concept living has removed walls and traditional rooms boundaries however just as the open office is getting

a refresh so too is our living space. Rethinking outdoor space also seems to be a commonality. Sliding exterior windows and doors that can open and extend living space is a major feature for all. As new construction focuses on generational preferences and needs, how are needs being met for those not looking to buy? Now that our homes are functioning as both office and classroom, many are struggling to conceive how to delineate these functions into the traditional home layout.

Studio Shed, a Colorado company that provides customizable, permit-free “backyard structures” is seeing major growth as a result of the pandemic. The company promises to provide flexible living solutions that can be designed and assembled online from a kit of parts. Their cheapest model begins at \$10,000 and has electric, heating and in some layouts full bathrooms and kitchens. According to website testimonials, these high-end sheds can be up and running in as little as four weeks. Studio Shed options include artist spaces, home offices, gyms, garages and even small studio apartments. The pandemic only accelerated the appeal of these modular and accessible structures. As work- and learn-from-home continue for the foreseeable future, these structures offer some respite from the house without the timely and costly construction. While Studio Shed (and other companies like it) offer “cheaper, hassle free” construction solutions, their price point skews much higher in our local market relative to construction. Still, the flexibility and customization of these structures offers real-time solutions.

Regardless of age or stage of life, our personal living spaces are being challenged. How we as designers can respond to this will be key. In just about every field, the pandemic has accelerated transitional changes that were bound to occur in time. At this moment, residential design must respond to both the inhabitant and their technology needs in ways it never had to in over a century. Current residential design trends are only scratching the surface at how we truly live — offering thin attempts to address modern lifestyles. Wholesale disrupters, such as Studio Shed may offer glimpses into our future ways of living and development. Generationally distinct preferences only speak to short-term solutions. Issues of sustainability, flexibility and relevance related to virtual living will be the drivers of the “home revolution.” The true future of home design will be based on need, not want and will go beyond the vapid offerings on HGTV. For architects of this generation, the real excitement is getting to reimagine our living spaces. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL as well as current president of A.I.A Rochester.