

Home remodeling projects restrained by recession

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Homeowners still pine for a refurbished kitchen or remodeled bathroom. They're just less willing to pull out all the stops to get one.

The American Institute of Architects released data in March indicating that in the fourth quarter of 2009, kitchen- and bath-remodeling projects were getting streamlined.

Whereas homeowners once wanted the best tile and cabinets available, they're now more interested in practical upgrades. Bigger isn't better all of a sudden, and the survey shows an increased interest in both energy-efficient updates and rooms adaptable to older homeowners' needs.

Area contractors are finding similar trends among their clients, and it's chiefly driven by the economic downturn.

The recession



Mike Finley, owner of Rocky Mountain Bathrooms, Inc., works on a large bathroom in an upscale Littleton home. (Diego James Robles | *The Denver Post*)

hangover has homeowners double-checking their improvement budgets, said Wes Cooper, owner of Denver-based Basements and Beyond.

Out go the high-end cabinets and top-tier tile. In go modest upgrades and innovative design.

"We're seeing clients go with less expensive tile and put in a pattern or design, just to give it a little bit of pizzazz," Cooper said. "They're definitely doing their research and using the Internet heavily to shop around for product."



Yuriy Stakhiv, left, of Rocky Mountain Bathrooms makes repairs while Tony Delandsheer of AGD Painting puts the finishing touches on paint at a Littleton home Wednesday. (Diego James Robles | *The Denver Post*)

The move toward more modest bath and kitchen remodeling happened roughly a year ago, he said, about the same time economists declared the recession in full swing.

"It's almost a daily conversation. 'How do we put a lot into the bathroom without having to go with expensive items?' " he said.

So Cooper's company will sketch out a plan for the project in question and then work with the homeowners on scaling it down until it fits their budget.

Mike Finley, owner of Rocky Mountain Bathrooms in Littleton, said clients who once asked him to gut their bathrooms are now interested in less extreme measures.

"We're seeing a little scaling down in the remodeling," Finley said. "Renovations are different today than they were 18 months ago. It's driven by cost."

What Finley hasn't seen is a move toward more energy-efficient bathrooms, or a push for more adaptable spaces.

Rich Norman, owner of the Kitchen & Bath Design Center in Fort Collins, said his clients are opting for function over flashiness.

"Those design elements typically cost money, and what's really driving things right now is the cost," Norman said. "They're trying to make their money go as far as they can."

That doesn't mean the revamped kitchens and bathrooms are eyesores.

"People are meeting their budgets and still having a nice-looking kitchen," he said.

And more homeowners are likely to follow that lead.

A new survey by American Express shows a majority of homeowners — 62 percent — plan some sort of home-improvement project this year at an average cost of \$6,200 per job. The survey also revealed a smaller majority's belief (53 percent) that a seller's market remains two or more years away.

Norman insists that creative contractors can still make modest remodeling projects look unique, adding that some homeowners are opting for more simplified looks based on Shaker design

templates, which focus on plain, durable furnishings.

Paul Belongea, owner of Denver-based Flat River Kitchens, hasn't seen the size of his projects shrink in recent months.

Instead, clients are being more exacting when it comes to the price tag attached to a kitchen remodel.

And they're able to get better prices lately because some local home construction companies are joining the remodeling game. That, Belongea said, is driving down costs for homeowners.