



Design for Empty Nesters

PHOTO COURTESY OF MITCHELL CHANNON DESIGN

While the housing market is far from sizzling, it is taking steady strides. Buyers, sellers, builders and remodelers are all feeling more confident about their respective moves. But it's the mature buyers—the empty nesters and Baby Boomers—who will leap ahead. That is, if they can get what they want.

But what do they want? It depends. The empty nester spectrum can begin as young as age 50 or as late as the early 70s. Homeowner needs, desires and interests are diverse, and their numbers are great. At some point now or in the near future, most will face decisions on where to live, what to live in and what to live with.

Mitchell Channon, a Chicago-based residential interior designer, says he sees the whole gamut of scenarios among his Baby Boomer clients, who may or may not have raised children.

BY PAMELA DITMER MCKUEN

“Mostly, people are moving from free-standing homes in the suburbs to the city, usually to a condominium, which affords them a completely different lifestyle,” he says. “Others move from free-standing homes in the suburbs to free-standing homes in the city because they want to be closer to the urban environment.”

Most empty nesters and boomers downsize, but not all. Some want indoor and outdoor play spaces and bedrooms for grandchil-

dren. Or they live with boomerang adult children. Others want cavernous kitchens for entertaining and gourmet cooking. And some don't move at all, preferring to transform their existing homes.

“Every one of my clients in the boomer category has a unique set of circumstances,” says Channon. Today's empty nesters are less likely to retire permanently to other parts of the country like the previous generation did. Many are deeply connected to their current locations for reasons of friends, family, grandchildren, houses of worship or other activities, says Jerry James, president of Edward R. James Companies in Glenview.

“What we are seeing is, if they have the money, keeping a second place in Arizona or some other climate more conducive to hanging out during the winter,” he says. “They want to enjoy the summers here and the people they have grown up with.”

The James Companies recently broke ground on Westgate at The Glen, a 171-home community comprised of 63 townhomes, 70 rowhomes and 38 cluster single-family homes. All the single-family homes and many of the rowhomes have first-floor master bedrooms, specifically for empty nesters who still want additional upstairs bedrooms for hosting.

What they do want is a home that is not as costly, both in time as well as the costs of owning a home, not to mention real estate taxes,” says James. “They are looking to simplify their lives and lead a more flexible life.”

Channon says his empty nester and boomer clients want great style that is reflective of what they have achieved in their lives. This move or design could be the last time they do it, and they want to do it right.

"They have generally been through a number of home purchases," he says. "They had a starter home and then a move-up home and maybe another move-up home after that. They have been stepping up in terms of their real estate investment, but the vision was always someone else's vision, no matter how high-end it might have been. It could be a developer's spec home or vintage, but it was someone else's home. Now they see this is as their opportunity to create a vision that is unique for them that they won't see anywhere else."

"One mature client, who has no children, moved directly from a single-family house to an independent living apartment in a continuing care facility. He had considered a condo as an interim move, but decided against it. He turned to Channon to renovate and appoint the apartment. "He's a very forward-thinking person," says Channon. "He is still interested in having a beautiful home, but a smaller one with guaranteed care as he needs it."

Housing choices aren't only about self-expression. Empty nesters demonstrate a strong sense of practicality as well. They are an active, busy bunch that doesn't wish to spend hours mowing lawns and shoveling snow. Many are still working, at least

part time. They want convenience and safety and the feeling that they can come and go at their leisure. Some find an elevator building tended to by door personnel reassuring, but some find it restrictive—they'd rather drive their car into a garage and walk into their homes.

Many have at least one eye on their future health needs, preferring open floor plans and walk-in showers, which are trendy now and can accommodate mobility equipment later. A few owners of multi-story, single-family homes have installed shafts to fit future elevators.

"They have owned homes before, and many understand what they want," says James. "They are very particular, and they

tend to be affluent. That doesn't mean they want to go crazy on exotic hardwoods, but this is a chance to move out of a house that might be older with fixtures and furnishings that have been around a while. But even people with means don't see a need to waste a lot of money."

Features with strong appeal include energy-efficient appliances and windows. Basements aren't as impressive because no one wants to deal with a potential flood, but alternative storage space is.

In master baths, raised vanities and soaking tubs rate higher than whirlpool tubs. Dining rooms are iffy, but 42-inch kitchen cabinets are important. The vaulted ceilings of the 1980s are viewed as energy-suckers.

"A few owners of multi-story, single-family homes have installed shafts to fit future elevators."

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