

Make Yourself at Home – Outdoors!

It's too easy these days to live almost exclusively in a climate-controlled, electronic world. Your days are spent going from air-conditioned house to car to workplace, with your ear glued to a cell phone or your fingers typing away on your personal digital assistant in between. But as people try to re-connect with nature, a new trend in home design—bringing the indoors outside—is emerging.

Many new and remodeled homes are blurring the lines between indoor and outdoor spaces. The New American Home is a home built annually in conjunction with NAHB's International Builders' Show to showcase state-of-the-art home-building techniques and materials. The 2009 home in Las Vegas, Nev., was designed with 1,791 square feet of covered outdoor space including a recessed patio with waterfall and fireplace and living room with outdoor televisions.

If you're thinking about building or remodeling to enhance the outdoor spaces at your home, here are a few of the latest outdoor living trends:

Fire elements. These can take the form of fireplaces or fire pits, or be as simple as a free-standing clay chimenea. Wood-burning elements are the most common, but they can also be outfitted to burn gas or a gel. Each has its own advantages or disadvantages with cost, maintenance, and other considerations such as smell or the crackling sound commonly associated with wood fires. Fire pits can be portable or built-in, and are often made with materials such as copper, iron or stone. Some feature colored, decorative glass pieces laid out in designs that reflect the flames.

Beds. Forget about hammocks or folding lawn chairs! Today, it's all about ultimate comfort. Outdoor beds have been seen on the pool decks of chic hotels in hip cities like Miami and Los Angeles for years. Designed for lounging or even napping, they come in a variety of sizes, generally have a futon-style mattress, and some have adjustable backrests. They are covered in weatherproof fabric, and matching your color scheme is easy with coordinating throw pillows.

Showers. Formerly seen just at beach houses and used strictly for removing sand, outdoor showers are now found in multi-million dollar Manhattan penthouses, apartment rooftops and suburban neighborhoods for everyday use. They incorporate natural elements such as stone, bamboo and plants, and are strategically designed to provide privacy, yet allow the user to enjoy the view and the feeling of showering in nature.

Having inviting outdoor living spaces in your home will help when it's time to sell, too. In the National Association of Home Builders' Consumer Preferences Surveys for both 2004 and 2007, more than three-quarters of respondents said having a patio, front porch or deck on their home was "desirable" or "essential." And in 2007, 62 percent wanted an outdoor fireplace or fire pit, a category that wasn't even an option in the 2004 survey.

So gather your friends around the fire pit, take an afternoon siesta on your outdoor bed, get ready for work with a refreshing backyard shower, or, check out "Indoors Out" on the DIY Network for more ideas on how to embrace the great outdoors without leaving your yard! To find a builder or remodeler in your area to help you, go to www.bia.net/directory.html.