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What buyers want

Homeowners more educated than ever on the latest decor and trends

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TORONTO STAR

To keep new homebuyers happy, banish "builder's beige" paint, say "no" to natural-coloured oak cabinets, forgo corner fireplaces and stop stippling ceilings.

Those were some of the words of wisdom that fashion/decor stylist Lynn Spence and interior designer Ramsin Khachi of Khachi Interiors (both regulars on Citytv's *CityLine*) offered to home builders at a seminar at the recent Ontario Home Builders' Association Renovation and Building Forum in Markham.

Spence says more homeowners are reading magazines and watching television shows dedicated to renovation and decor, so they are very educated about what they want and the latest trends.

"We go into some new homes after the fact (already built and finishes chosen) where we have to work miracles, at times," Spence says. "It's advantageous for you to know some of the struggles we face. I'm going to give you insider information that will make you better builders in a small or large way."

Spence says most people hate bland "builder's beige" paint commonly used in new houses and will paint over it within months.

A "clean, crisp, brown-enhanced beige" is preferable, or soft greys with warm brown undertones, she says.

Spence and Khachi also suggest painting trim in creamy tones instead of stark whites.

"People spend a lot of money replacing the trim colour," Spence says. "Do it in softer, warmer whites and the buyer will be much happier."

Another trend that emerged last year was using the ceiling – "the sixth wall" as Spence calls it – as a design element using paint, coffers, panelling or moulding to create effects like baffles or honeycombs.

"Stop with the popcorn ceilings," Spence says, listing it as a personal pet peeve. "People can't stand stucco (stipple) and want simple, flat ceilings. Designers across North America are talking about designing the ceiling and we need a clean canvas to work with."

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Spence and Khachi say the dining and living room, the great room and the powder room are the best rooms to create "designer ceilings." They advise painting the ceiling and the architectural feature used on it, like moulding or trim, in whites and off-whites: "Don't try to do it with colours."

Khachi and Spence also say that while soaring cathedral and two-storey ceilings are a popular feature in great rooms these days, "people love them at first, then two days later, ask `what can I do for artwork? Nothing's big enough!"

They suggest dropping beams – painted, wood-stained or otherwise – from the ceiling to create an architectural element and break up all that wide, open space.

Bringing the outdoors inside remains a huge trend, "and people are embracing natural elements like stone and wood," Khachi says.

Stone is one of the hottest products, and it is best to use it floor-to-ceiling on fireplaces or on a full wall "to create a sense of space."

The new generation of hardwood floors is "phenomenal," they say, with exotic and recycled looking woods being popular, as well as detailing like herringbone patterns.

This desire for natural elements is extending to furniture and decor elements, such as antler chandeliers, rough-hewn wood bowls and driftwood as sculpture. Even modern homes are using barn beams to create roughness in too-sterile, too clean environments, Khachi says.

However, "wood is great, but there are types we absolutely hate," he adds.

On the most-loathed list? Those natural-coloured oak kitchen cabinets with big, open grain.

"They are just not appealing, but people are forced to pick them because it's one of the builder's standards," Khachi says. "They should be eliminated as a selection."

Painted cabinets, especially in white and off-white are hot, even for very simple flat cabinets, and they create a sophisticated look, he says.

Spence says natural oak flooring should also be banished because its yellow cast makes it difficult to decorate around and creates "a very cocoon, cave-like atmosphere."

Dark-stained floors are the trend, she adds.

And those natural oak spindles that are a staple on many builders' list of standards?

Away with them too, as "most clients want dark-stained banisters, white spindles, dark treads and white risers," like they are seeing in decor magazines and on TV.

One of the most common homeowner headaches is the brick fireplace and the design issues it presents.

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"We both feel brick is a material best left outside the house," Spence says. "We get asked all the time what to do with brick fireplaces. When it's brick, it becomes a focal point in a room and homeowners have other beautiful focal points, like armoires.

"This is a personal pet peeve, as it's hard to place artwork on brick and a corner brick fireplace will do me in, every time."

She and Khachi say builders should ensure that a fireplace is in proportion to the wall, and the hearth and mantel should be the same width. Electricians should place wiring so sconces can be hung on the fireplace wall, straight up from the edge.

The pair also urge builders not to steal space from the foyer, as homeowners hate having to step right into the living room from the front entrance.

"Many homeowners will take designers along before they buy a house or show them plans and we discourage them from buying houses without a proper foyer," Spence says. "The foyer needs to have a wall, as homeowners want to be able to have a table, sconces and a mirror. It makes a statement about what to expect in the rest of the house. The house doesn't feel expensive or finished otherwise. And don't chintz out by using half-walls."

Other often-seen new home features the pair frown on:

- Archways in doorways, especially in small 30-inch openings.
- Wall and art niches. "They demand clutter and fill up with dust, so what's the point?" Spence says.
- Rounded drywall corners, which make it difficult to change paint colours from one area to another and give a Spanish look to any house they are used in.
- Too many unnecessary doorways. "Think about what's essential and what's not," Spence adds. "Walls are more useful than several doorways."

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- Arched or rounded-top windows. They're virtually impossible to find window coverings for, creating the potential for light to fade furniture, fabrics and floors. These windows also look dated. While Khachi and Spence like large windows, they urge builders not to put windows right to the ceiling or edge of a wall, as it's impossible to hang curtain rods unless there is at least eight inches of drywall to either side or above a window.

- Not enough space for furnishings. Spence cautions that furniture is getting bigger again "and people don't want to walk into a house they are planning to buy and see that they would have to get rid of what they have."

Sectional sofas are "coming back with a vengeance," as well as large armoires and coffee tables and five or six-piece bedroom sets. Rooms must be large enough to accommodate these beloved pieces, she says.

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