

BIG BUILDERS' TOP-SELLING PLANS

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Even as economists debate whether discounts on some high-end homes signal a broader softening in the housing market, one indicator continues to rise: The biggest homes in suburbia are getting even bigger. The nation's largest builders of luxury homes say their top-selling designs lately have expanded to include more bathrooms, giant master-suite closets and extra rooms designated as teen dens, hobby rooms or even "bonus" rooms. Toll Brothers, of Horsham, Pa., says its best-selling plan this year has a base size of 4,800 square feet -- 1,600 bigger than its top seller of five years ago. WCI Communities, of Bonita Springs, Fla., says the most popular plan in its Mid-Atlantic region measures 5,425 square feet, up 250 square feet from its 2000 bestseller.

To get a better idea of what's being built in some of the most expensive housing developments around the country, we asked some of the country's biggest home-builders to provide us with the plans from the top-selling models in their upper range -- with sales prices of roughly \$500,000 to \$2 million, depending on location. Builders included Toll and WCI, plus Pulte Homes, of Bloomfield Hills, Mich., the nation's second-largest builder by units; Dallas-based Centex Corp., the No. 4 builder; Standard Pacific Corp., of Irvine, Calif.; and Shea Homes, of Walnut, Calif. Together, these companies build about 90,000 homes per year.

Because builders' top plans often vary by region, we ended up looking at about 15 current bestsellers. We pored through plans with names like Grand Michelangelo, Chatsworth and Carrington. Then we compared them with about 10 plans builders said were their most popular five years ago. Even in the relatively slow-moving world of builder-home design, we found significant developments -- including higher ceilings, expanded kitchens with bigger islands and a proliferation of "mud rooms." We also found regional differences: Formal living rooms are popular in the East, but in the West, many customers are giving them up and adding walk-in closets or bigger bathrooms.

One of the top overall sellers, according to company reports: Toll Brothers' Hampton, a 4,800-square-foot home with four bedrooms and 4½ baths. Its master-bedroom area includes a bath with two private toilet areas and a tub on a raised platform, and offers two closets -- including a 250-square-foot walk-in with cathedral ceilings that runs the length of the three-car garage below it. Available in markets from the Midwest through the Northeast, the

home comes in architectural looks from Colonial and Federal to Provincial. One variant of Toll's Georgian-style Hampton has a brick facade and a portico with four white metal columns that hold up a second-floor faux balcony. The price starts at about \$610,000 (the company also sells a version of the Hampton, the Henley, with more expensive fittings).

"It's monstrous, it's gigantic, it's spread out -- we loved it," says Ramana Bondugula, who toured a version of the Hampton while home-shopping last year with his wife, Varija. The 39-year-old systems analyst at an investment company says he liked the giant master suite, while the two-story foyer with sweeping dual staircases reminded him of his favorite Bollywood movies. So the Bondugulas, who have two children, picked the Hampton -- but then chose an optional upgrade, which added two more bedrooms and baths. Total space of their new \$900,000 house in Marlboro, N.J.: 5,600 square feet, with six bedrooms.

Toll Brothers, which expects to complete about 8,500 homes in the year ending in October, says it offers more than 500 designs for detached single-family homes. The Hampton, which it began offering five years ago, became its top seller last year, with 275 of the homes built in the year that ended in March 2005. The previous bestseller and Toll's current No. 2 plan is the more understated Columbia -- a 3,200- square-foot home that also has four bedrooms, but two fewer baths and a smaller, two-car garage. It has half the combined kitchen and closet space of the Hampton.

Of course, these are not typical American homes. According to U.S. government figures, new single-family homes sold for a median price of \$215,000 in June, and averaged 2,405 square feet in the first quarter of 2005. Big homes are inflating the overall average: Last year, Americans built 311,000 homes measuring 3,000 square feet or more, double the amount in 1994. In all, the average size of a new home in the U.S. has increased 15% in the past 10 years.

Reports of Decline

Homes continue to expand in this segment, even as many factors point to their decline. Many Americans have traded down from other bigger-is-better icons, with sales of SUVs, for example, falling in 2004. A big-home backlash began in the late '90s -- led by books like "The Not So Big House," by architect Sarah Susanka -- and some established communities, including three northern New Jersey towns and a Los Angeles neighborhood, have passed ordinances capping the size of new homes. Big homes are also tough to fit on new lots: The median lot size for detached homes in America shrank 10% in the 10 years ending in 2003, to 8,998 square feet, the Census Bureau says.

NOW AND THEN

Toll Brothers' best-selling homes



Top: The Hampton, 2005

Base square feet: 4,800

Features: 9 ft. second-floor ceilings; 4.5 baths, including his & hers toilets in master; 260 sq. ft. kitchen; 320 sq. ft. master-suite closets; mud room; and three-car garage.



Bottom: The Columbia, 2000

Base Square Feet: 3,200

Features: 90 sq. ft. master-suite closets; 8 ft. second-floor ceilings; 150 sq. ft. kitchen; and two-car garage.

New-home buyers are a small but influential group. Only about 1% to 2% of all U.S. households buy new homes each year, and buyers of homes in the 4,000- to 7,000-square-foot range make up about 6% of new-home buyers. Yet new-home buyers steer the entire direction of new development and shape the look of neighborhoods for years to come, says Dowell Myers, professor of urban planning and demography at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. "It's not like builders serve the average person," Prof. Myers says. "This is a person who just wants new."

Below, a look at what's popular now, according to the developer plans we studied:

More Rooms

Top-selling plans from the big builders are packed with new rooms. The second floor of most of the plans we examined includes a loft or "bonus" room. Most master suites have "retreat" or "sitting" rooms, in addition to dressing areas. One of the most popular models offered by Shea Homes for the Sacramento, Calif., market has a "hobby" room. (Hobby rooms are optional in many other plans, as are sun rooms off the living room.) One of Pulte's bestselling one-story designs in the San Diego area includes a "teen" room -- which, five years ago, the builder called a bonus room. "A room designated for teenagers to gather is more appealing than a bonus room,

which can mean anything," says the plan's architect, John Thatch of Dahlin Group in San Ramon, Calif.

Some buyers don't know what to do with the space. In Leesburg, Va., Huy Nguyen and his wife, Yen, paid \$1.3 million last year for a 6,200-square-foot home based on the Grand Michelangelo, WCI's best-selling model in the mid-Atlantic region. The home includes a "keeping" room next to the breakfast area, which a spokeswoman says can be used as a gathering place for guests before a meal, or as a computer alcove. "We don't know what it's for," says Mr. Nguyen, 43, owner of a Web-site design firm. "Maybe we'll put in a cappuccino machine."

Added Storage

Walk-in closets, linen storage and even garages have ballooned. In Toll's Hampton plan, the master suite has two closets -- the 250-square-foot main closet, plus a second at 70 square feet. (Size of the single closet in its previous top seller: 90 square feet.) The top seller for Standard Pacific in Orange County, Calif., comes with 300 square feet of closet space in the master suite, up from 110 square feet in 2001's top seller.

In most plans, secondary bedrooms also include more stowing space. The auxiliary bedrooms in WCI's Grand Michelangelo all have walk-in closets; in its Grand Monet plan of five years ago, they did not.

Most current bestsellers have three-car garages -- room for a fourth is sometimes an option -- compared with two-car garages five years ago. Toll's No. 1 plan in California, the Santa Barbara design, has dual two-car garages, though the company says the extra space is meant for storage or as a workshop.

Central Kitchen

In most top-selling plans, the kitchen takes center stage, and the kitchen island is its most prominent feature. Centex's top-seller in San Ramon, Calif., has an 8-by-6 foot island -- compared to a 5-by-3 foot island five years ago -- that now accommodates a vegetable sink and an auxiliary dishwasher. The stove in Standard Pacific's top-selling plan in Orange County, Calif., has six burners; in 2001, its most popular plan had five.

Denise Batts, 32, a mortgage-company manager in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., says the kitchen (walk-in pantry, six-burner stove) was a big selling point of the \$950,000 Santa Barbara from Toll Brothers that she and her husband, Nakia, moved into last year. "I can have eight women in the kitchen and we're not bumping into each another," says Mrs. Batts.

Bigger Baths

'His' and 'hers' toilets -- separate, private facilities in the master bath -- are now standard in some top plans. Toll's top-selling two-story home in Florida, the Carrington, goes one step further -- with completely separate master baths for him and her. Mrs. Batts of Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., says she found her home's his-and-hers toilet arrangement almost as appealing as the kitchen. "I don't have to worry about the seat being up," she says. In the master bath, most showers now have two or three showerheads, and most tubs are at least a foot longer than in 2000's top plans. Often, bathing has gone public: Toll's Hampton has a raised tub in the center of its master bathroom, while WCI's Grand Michelangelo has an enclosure in the middle of its master bath with in-shower seating for at least four.

Regional Differences

Most best-selling plans in the Midwest and Northeast feature a center-hall design in which the living and dining room are split by a two-story entry foyer. Houses in these parts of the country also tend to have mud rooms -- spaces between the garage and kitchen where family members can shed coats, shoes or backpacks. Toll's Hampton plan has a mud room that's bigger than the laundry; the bestseller from five years ago didn't have one at all.

Meanwhile, the most popular houses in some big Southern and Western markets -- Florida, Texas, Arizona and California -- tend to be single-story, with outdoor living spaces including internal courtyards and covered loggias. In these markets, living rooms are also on the wane, with Centex's top plan in Dallas leaving it out altogether. The formal living room is "just something that isn't used" in the South and West, says Kevin Scott, vice president of architecture at Centex.

David and Suzanne Marzouk of San Ramon, Calif., picked a plan from Centex with a combined living and dining room. Even so, they spend most of their time in the family room of their \$1.3 million house, which measures 4,700 square feet. Says Mr. Marzouk, 50, a structural engineer for a power company: "The bigger the home, the more relaxed I feel."



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