

HOME & GARDEN

Green design trumps in-the-red economy

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Granite is still the hands-down favorite, but it looks like concrete, PaperStone and IceStone — all environmentally friendly materials — are catching up. And although more folks are pinching pennies these days, don't expect Formica to make a big comeback anytime soon.

Yep, countertops. Turns out they matter quite a bit: According to local builders, the big trends in remodeling these days can essentially be symbolized by the materials homeowners are choosing to cover their kitchens' flat surfaces.

The upshot? "Green" building is big and

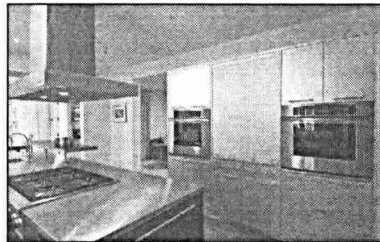
getting bigger, and although homeowners are more concerned about money than they were a year ago, they're not necessarily letting go of the idea of their dream home.

"It's not so much about them downgrading materials, but about trying to get the same high-end materials for cheaper," observed Leroy Johnson, co-owner of Four Brothers, a custom carpentry and remodeling firm.

So consumers are still choosing cutting-edge, ecologically conscious appliances that they hope will save

them energy and money down the line. That might include geothermal systems, which heat a home using the earth's constant temperature, and tankless water heaters that

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Courtesy of **BOWA Builders**

In kitchens and elsewhere, environmental choices prevail.



warm water in a flash rather than maintaining a full tank indefinitely. And LED lights, which use far less energy than even compact fluorescent bulbs, are “getting trendy right now,” said Basim Mansour, owner of Michael and Son Services. “We’re installing a lot of those.”

There are also a number of sustainable materials used in “finishes” (add-ons after a home’s structural elements and basic fixtures are in place) that have become increasingly popular. Customers are asking for low-VOC paints (they don’t give off the chemicals that regular paint does) and cabinets made without formaldehyde.

In the countertop realm, concrete — an environmentally sustainable material that’s become hip — is facing stiff competition from IceStone, a mix of concrete and recycled glass, and PaperStone, a composite that includes recycled paper.

But not all requests to improve a home’s sustainability are for swanky new appliances and glittery aesthetic elements.

Steve Kirstein, a principal with Bowa Builders, said his company has been getting an increasing number of orders to improve a home’s insulation.

It makes sense, he pointed out. “One of the most effective things you can do is work on your insulation — that will save you a lot more than going to a high-efficiency that or a high-efficiency this.”

These days, foam insulation sprayed on the inside of a wall can prevent most air leakage, and adding a layer of standard insulation on top of that can make the house “much more comfortable — and much less expensive to heat,” according to Kirstein.

It’s an investment, sure — but one that hopefully will pay off pret-

ty quickly in reduced heating bills. That’s one money-saving strategy for cash-strapped times.

And builders say they’re seeing a variety of other approaches that allow customers to avoid cutting back on their housing plans. Like asking for financing options that let them pay off construction bills in installments. Or seeking multiple bids for a project to be sure they’re getting the very lowest price.

Ahmed Mady and Sunil Chhabra, co-owners of Paragon Remodeling, say they’re noticing an increase in new homeowners buying fixer-uppers and hiring contractors, rather than paying more for a fully finished place.

“A lot of people realize they can buy the homes and remodel them — the remodeling business is definitely increasing,” said Mady. “It’s not as convenient as walking into a fully fixed-up home, but if you can tough it out and work with a general contractor to get the place renovated, you’ll save some money.”

Not everyone is succeeding in those efforts. Basim Mansour, from Michael and Son Services, tells stories about customers who shelled out thousands of dollars on plans for a renovation project but then couldn’t qualify for a loan to move forward with construction.

On the other side of the equation, though, many of the building companies are doing better than OK — some say they’re having a great year.

“We’re actually doing really well because we’re relatively low-priced,” said Johnson, of Four Brothers. “We’ve never been so busy.”

Mady, at Paragon Remodeling, concurred. “People can’t afford to move, so they want to make their houses nicer,” he said.