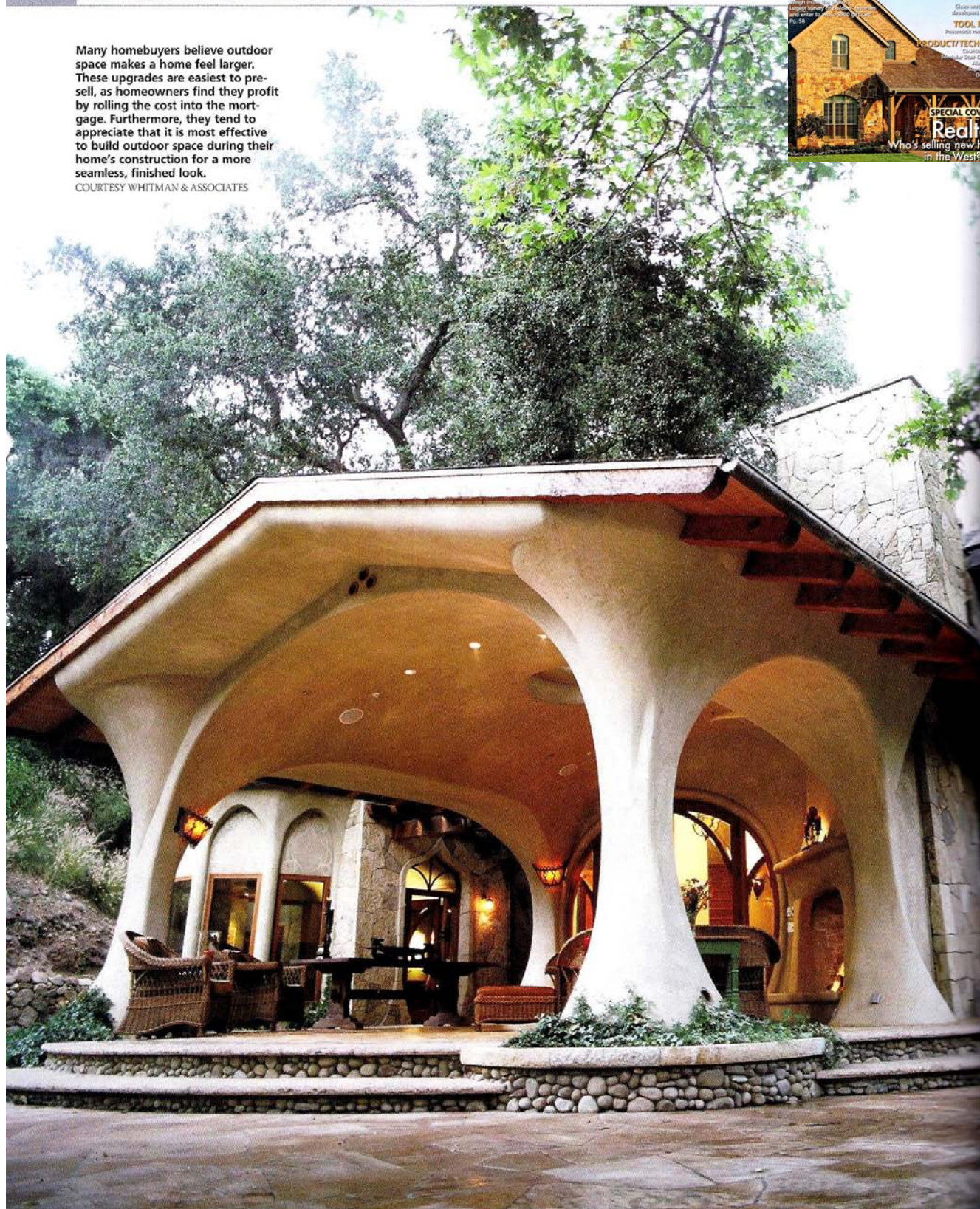


FEATURE // OUTDOOR LIVING

Many homebuyers believe outdoor space makes a home feel larger. These upgrades are easiest to pre-sell, as homeowners find they profit by rolling the cost into the mortgage. Furthermore, they tend to appreciate that it is most effective to build outdoor space during their home's construction for a more seamless, finished look.

COURTESY WHITMAN & ASSOCIATES



The great outdoor room boom

Builders unearth cash by the yard

{By Nan Bauroth}

This ain't your mama's backyard! Today Patio-Daddy-o's are spending megabucks to extend their living quarters into Mother Nature. And according to experts, there's gold in them thar hills.

"Outdoor spaces can usually be built at half the cost of interior structures," says Marc Whitman, AIA, principal of Whitman & Associates in Ojai, Calif., whose work has been featured on HGTV.

Steve Hamilton, CEO of Western Star Construction in Orem, Utah, agrees. "It's usually half the cost. And a lot of times there are add-ons, which are usually profitable. But it's definitely cheaper to do as you're building the home, when everything else is going in, and you can plan better for it that way."

In the opinion of Dan Shimek, president of Firestone Home Products, based in Minnesota, you leverage profit

because you can build exterior space relatively quickly. "Smart builders evaluating this market have identified this factor, particularly now as they're not selling as many homes. Outdoor spaces add profit to your bottom line, as these are products in general that you are not typically selling. But if you are a homeowner, the best and easiest time to do this is when you are constructing so you can build it into your mortgage."

Whitman seconds that notion. "The homeowner feels they have profited because it makes the home feel so much larger than it is. But outdoor spaces should also be incorporated in design at beginning so main living spaces flow naturally." In his experience, if you add it later, it may cost you more to do things like ensure that overall roof lines of the outdoor space and home fit.

According to Katherine Spitz, a renowned landscape designer and principal of Katherine Spitz Associates in



(Top) The Green Scene, one of the fastest-growing, award-winning outdoor design and construction firms in the Los Angeles area, incorporates pool, spa and hearth into an extraordinary outdoor room with architectural features like columns and an intricate scroll-work dome. COURTESY NICK LUCERO, GREENSCENELANDSCAPE.COM

(Bottom) This rustic stucco and tile outdoor kitchen is integrated with the Spanish-style home and features extensive work and eat surfaces with built-in grill, refrigerator and prep station with cabinets. COURTESY WHITMAN & ASSOCIATES

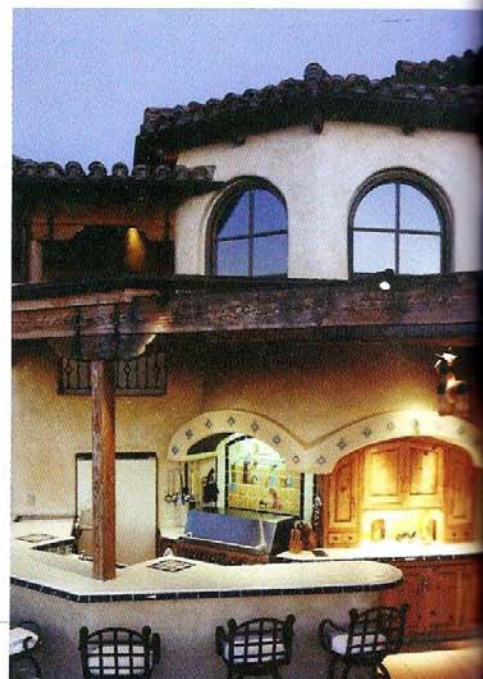
Marina del Rey, Calif., constructing outdoor space is ideally done at the beginning. "If we come in late and discover the house is four feet above the soil, we want a closer relationship between the house and garden to make a more comfortable transition between inside and out. If a homeowner runs into budget problems, though, it's best to do all the hardscape, grading and pool, then add plantings over time."

She says at the moment fountains are in fashion because they provide intimacy. "When you hear the sparkle of water, you know there's something you need to go to." She also thinks stormwater runoff rules will present an opportunity to create rain basins that can be designed as wetland gardens to attract wildlife.

The mania for outdoor space is so hot that this spring, HGTV's "Property Buzz" will feature four designs by Scott Cohen, a cutting-edge garden artisan and owner of The Green Scene in Canoga Park, Calif.

"Viewers will get out on-site with us—way out," Cohen insists. "They'll see each project from initial communication with the client, through construction, to the final hurrah. And these are big jobs—swim-up bars, covered pools with solid patio covers—that kind of thing."

Cohen's "wow" designs are so much in demand that he





Firestone Home Products reports that customers are snapping up its Tuscany and Sonoma Outdoor GreatRooms. These yard suites feature a pergola, fireplace, island with grill, French lanterns and wicker furniture. COURTESY FIRESTONE HOME PRODUCTS

Cohen says vanishing or "zero-edge" pools and spas as well as waterfalls are ultracool right now. To enhance the aura, he'll add a bridge for guests to cross over, or swimmers to glide beneath. "The most exciting thing I'm doing is creating fire-and-water effects with torches or firepits near the pool, so the reflection shimmers at night."

Paul Frey, sales manager of Backyards of America, in Sandy, Utah, which has made a tremendous profit over the past 17 years selling Sundance hot tubs and spas, says the latest craze is hot tubs with aromatherapy and LED lights to create a resort feel in your own back yard. People are also splurging for hot tubs with waterproof stereos and TVs.

Another big seller at Backyards of America is gazebos made of synthetic or composite materials. "People want something with a wood appearance but without the maintenance. They want to spend more time enjoying their back yard, not caring for it." The Sundance gazebo lines include options such as windows, sunroofs to see the stars, privacy louvers and metal roofs to handle snowload.

At Firestone Home Products, customers are snapping up

Tuscany and Sonoma Outdoor GreatRooms. These yard suites feature a pergola, fireplace, island with grill, French lanterns and wicker furniture. With more density in housing, Shimek is also selling a lot of the company's new Electric Cook Number Grill, a flameless electric grilling unit small enough for townhouses and condos.

Naturally, homeowners want all the comforts of home outdoors, and that includes sophisticated lighting—for instance, dimmer switches in a gazebo to control the mood. Whitman has gone so far as to install radiant floor heating outside for upscale clients.

Special effects are another must-have. Cohen recently designed an elaborate outdoor pool bar for a Hollywood entertainer, faced with 250 wine bottles lit by 500 fiber optic cables that produce a dazzling light show at night.

Casting in concrete

It sounds like something out of "The Flintstones," but one of the newest outdoor living room accoutrements is concrete couches.



The mystical, hardscaped covered patio and pond (rear view of image shown on pg. 48) are in harmony with the home and surroundings. "Outdoor spaces can usually be built at half the cost of interior structures," says the architect, Marc Whitman, AIA, principal of Whitman & Associates in Ojai, California, whose work has been featured on HGTV. COURTESY WHITMAN & ASSOCIATES

Bev Garnant, executive director of the American Society of Concrete Contractors in St. Louis, says the newest artistic forms of decorative concrete are showing up in firepits, bars, outdoor kitchen counters and garden furniture.

Depending on what you're building, the cost may be similar to other materials. But compared to granite, marble or imported stone, there can be significant savings. "You can also take existing concrete—a patio, deck or sidewalk—and stain it or do an overlay," says Garnant. "You can create whatever the homeowner has in mind."

Hamilton concurs. "The general trend in the decorative industry is moving away from stamping into areas including acid stains, overlays, stencils or epoxies. Imagination is the only limit to what you can do with the technology they've come up with."

Demand for decorative concrete in Utah is so great that he's just launched a subsidiary, Broken Arrow Decorative Concrete, to focus on residential work. "We work mainly in gardens, patios, pools and barbecue areas, highlighting it with concrete, and with flooring in varied ways. There are materials you can stamp vertically and create brick or stone appearances around a plywood[-formed] barbecue."

Tom Ralston, president of Tom Ralston Concrete in Santa

Cruz, Calif., and an expert in decorative interior and exterior hardscape, says his seminars on acid staining are wildly popular because this artistic avenue offers good profits.

Out on the West Coast there's a decided taste for avant-garde concrete. "My most profitable areas are large hardscape and pool decks," says Ralston. Yet the product is so versatile, he also does inexpensive outdoor kitchen counters and patios in a palette of over 40 colors.

And why call Domino's when you can have your own outdoor pizza oven? Ralston often integrates them with gas grills, surrounded with bluestone veneers, or brick, or concrete countertops stained to match the floor.

And then Ralston had this golf nut, a guy who only plays with a No. 14 Titleist ball. So Ralston turned his client's side yard—normally wasted space—into a putting green, then poured a concrete patio shaped like the ball, jackhammered tattoo dimples, etched circles, and scored in the logo.

Whether your backyard-enthusiast clients love outdoor cooking and entertaining, putting, or hottubbing—they'll reap rewards from investing in their home's surroundings, and so will you. ■

Related Advertisers: Dynamic Precast, Inc., p. 15 & 78; Trex, p. 13; Arbogast Construction, p. 78; Allweather Wood Treaters, p. 73.