

Wellesley Weston

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All in the Family Room

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It's the room where the fireplace flickers in January. Where the four-move checkmate is tested. The place where Pats fans watch Brady throw passes. Where homework clutters the desk and coffee tables invite slippered feet. The spot for books, watching cartoons, playing "Clue," and taking naps. It's the destination of familial migration. It's the family room.

The family room has "a more casual atmosphere than the slowly declining parlor or living room," says builder Ray Wiese. West Newton Designer Jill Litner Kaplan adds, "While the kitchen is traditionally thought of as the heart of the home, the family room might be an offshoot of that area."

When speaking of the family room, those in the industry hearken back to the old "rec" room in the basement where kids played foosball after school. The course of a generation moved the rec room upstairs, changed its name to the den, and later bulged it into the great room of the last decade. Today's family rooms are different, and their design is largely driven by the environment and the economy.

Woodmeister's Chris Komenda has watched requests for buildings made with low VOC materials and excellent ventilation increase, especially from families with children learning to crawl or household members with allergies. She says people stay home more and luxuriate inside. "The trend is toward less showiness with a lot of personality inside the home."

Williams and Spade designer Jeanne Racioppi doesn't like to be wasteful. She'd rather pull out and repair a classic length of molding or a sticky drawer on a hundred year-old butler pantry than rip it apart and start over. Her clients, especially those of the younger generation, are well-educated in green living and appreciate repurposing.

Judy O'Neil-Labins of Shafer O'Neil Interior Design says that her clients don't even want to hear the word "green." They want to assume it is so.

If environmental awareness tinted family rooms green, the economy put them on a diet. "People have become realistic about size," says Wiese. O'Neil-Labins says, "Houses pushed the limit, but the sizes are coming down again." Ten years ago the family room was a supersized 24 feet by 24 feet needing beefy furniture arrangements and gulping down hot and cool air. Post-boom consumers put their money into happiness. Maybe a soft, neutral oasis flooded with natural light flowing seamlessly through glass walls into a garden or stretch of woods.

Uncertainty in the economy, the global status, and myriad other predicaments seem to have stimulated the need for authenticity at home. Wiese installs more gas fireplaces today than he has in the breadth of his career. Fifteen years ago, he would have been thrown out of town for lack of purism if he recommended a gas fireplace over the traditional wood burning hearth. These days he guesses 80 percent of new family rooms include fireplaces and 70 percent of those are gas powered.

All in the Family Room



It takes careful consideration to select what is important for today's family room. Kaplan put together a list of key ingredients essential for creating a family room that is comfy and cozy, stylish and unique. Included on this list are four key elements: storage, furnishings, surfaces, and technology.

Storage

If undergarments are an outfit's foundation, built-in storage is a family room's. Kaplan recommends a combination of closed cabinetry and exposed shelves. "Families acquire stuff at an unbelievable rate. A family room has to be able to accommodate." Cabinets hide toys, games, and homework supplies. Shelves help to create atmosphere in an otherwise empty room. Shelves are a display area not only for books, but treasures or photographs that reflect a family's life together.

