



DESIGN INTERVENTION

Designers say reinvented outdoor spaces helping ease consumers' pandemic stress

By Bill McLoughlin

Consumer lifestyle shifts stemming from the COVID-19 virus are proving a boon to the home furnishings industry, and nowhere is this more evident than in the outdoor design arena. With consumers in some parts of the country confined to their homes just as the outdoor season was kicking off, the category saw activity increase dramatically.

And while the pandemic forced many full-line furniture and specialty stores to close their doors early on, the design community's ability to work remotely and one-on-one left designers well-positioned to capitalize on consumers' intensified interest in revamping their outdoor spaces. As a result, outdoor design projects have proven fertile ground for designers looking to satisfy clients who are trading vacations for staycations or just looking to upgrade their outdoor room.

Home furnishings overall has seen a lift this summer as consumers' increased time at home

has fueled desire to refresh their living spaces. Additionally, the shift of discretionary spending away from experiential activities like restaurants, cruises, theaters and sporting events, most of which have been closed to accommodate social-distancing requirements, has freed additional dollars for home-related spending.

BACKYARD OASIS

Outdoor redesigns have enjoyed the added benefit of providing an escape from feelings of home confinement and are serving as a safer alternative for those still wanting to entertain while accommodating recommended social distancing guidelines. "With COVID-19, the fresh air and being outside is more beneficial than being inside with a bunch of people," designer Barclay Butera told *Casual Living*. "The outdoor space is becoming more and more important."

"The pandemic has served as a hard reset for everybody," explained designer Libby Langdon. "That means moving to simpler things, such as being outside and enjoying time with friends and family. Who knows what will happen in the fall? We may only be able to meet up with friends and family six feet apart."

According to designers, the pandemic is helping to shape clients' backyard design choices as they look to escape the stresses of reduced or constrained social engagement and a fraught economic and political climate. Many are seeking a backyard oasis, a quiet place of rest and retreat that mirrors the experience of their favorite resort or vacation getaway.

This is translating into designs with more neutral palettes and subdued patterns as well as themes that harken back to safer, simpler times. "My new fabrics speak to this and are more neutral, peaceful," said Butera. "It's about creating a more comfortable environment.

Diana Apgar's award-winning outdoor design featured outdoor cooking, dining and relaxation spaces.

Even where there is color, it's a pale steel gray-blue, and I've got a Palm Spring look that's very retro and harkens back to the 1950s and '60s. Bright colors are very distracting right now because your mind is going all over the place."

MORE FEATURES, FUNCTION

Functionally, outdoor designs are incorporating features and functions that are blurring the lines between indoor and out even more than they have in recent years. This includes bringing more electricity into play and even creating outdoor spaces that go beyond their indoor counterparts.

"We're seeing an uptick in outdoor kitchens," said Langdon, who is currently working on a project that includes an outdoor pizza oven. "And I think people are now looking to the fall as well and realizing they can extend the season with heaters or fireplaces. People have never really thought about spending a lot of time outside in the fall, but I think that's going to change this year."

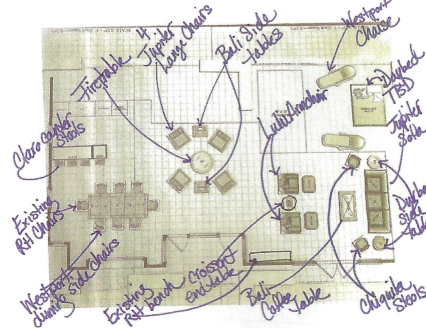
With many customary expenses coming off the family budget as a result of activities that are no longer available, at least for the moment, designers say consumers are choosing to invest those dollars into better furnishings and other upgrades to their outdoor rooms. "We've added technology that makes the space more user friendly and more comfortable, as well as better and more luxurious furnishings," said Ryan Hughes, owner of Ryan Hughes Design Build. "We're seeing more fun water and fire features, and kitchens have become way more elaborate."

Hughes explained that his business model is built around full-service design that includes pools, landscaping and other backyard built-ins. So it's not uncommon in this environment for his clients to add things such as life-size chess boards and beach volleyball courts, all amenities that are helping people realign their lifestyles around less travel and more home-centered entertainment.

Langdon added that one new area that she's seeing this year is outdoor exercise. With many gyms continuing to be shut down as a result of local pandemic-related regulation, clients are looking for new ways to accommodate their exercise routines, and she noted that even as they begin reopening this could be an important new area for outdoor design.

NEW WAY TO WORK

All this renewed design activity is not com-



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ing without changes to the process, however. Traditional consultation methods have undergone as much renovation as clients' backyards, with Zoom and other teleconference platforms often replacing face-to-face meetings, and even site visits and in-person consultations being conducted with a new emphasis on social distancing.

"Zoom has been wonderful, and a lot of people are fine talking with us that way," said Diana Apgar, Decorating Den's 2020 Designer of the Year. "We still have to make appointments and go there sooner or later, but we're wearing masks and gloves to measure and look at the spaces. And we're always going to have to do that."

She and others noted that there is, and will continue to be, a need for consumers to touch and feel select products, and the goal going forward is to create processes and conditions that allow clients to feel safe while still getting the in-

One of Libby Langdon's current outdoor projects includes individual product selections and notes on furnishings placement.

teraction with product that they need. Designers also pointed out that, unlike in retail selling environments, a significant portion of their work is repeat projects and referrals, which often means that clients have already established a level of trust and comfort with their designer.

AVAILABLE PRODUCT

One area where designers are facing the same constraints as their retail counterparts today is inventory availability. While the shutdowns initially left many manufacturers with inventory on-hand from cancelled or delayed retail orders, the flood of consumers back to retail once stores reopened has left manufacturers struggling to refill pipelines and bring previously shuttered or scaled-back manufacturing capacity back up to speed.

"The biggest challenge right now is merchandise availability," said Langdon. "Placing orders we've had the challenge of having to replace or re-source several pieces."

Despite the challenges, designers near universally say they expect sales this year to meet or exceed those of last year, despite the short-term disruptions early in the season.

And one of the keys to that has been the stability of the housing market. Decorating Den's Apgar noted that unlike 2008, which saw the industry and the economy dramatically impacted by a steep decline in the housing market, the challenges this time are of a different, and to date more manageable, nature.