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The de-Tuscanization of Las Vegas



Luxury Designer Experts say the Tuscan design is falling out of favor in the Las Vegas luxury home market.



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The rebound in the Las Vegas housing market from the downturn has seen a transition to a design that is more modern and contemporary. That means cleaner homes that are more open with fewer walls and kitchens built for entertainment.

During the housing boom more than a decade ago, builders gave buyers what they wanted: homes in the Tuscan design, the region of Central Italy in the Mediterranean, with an Old World feel with granite, stone, travertine floors, interior arches, terracotta roof tiles, ornate features and color schemes such as brown and gold.

Donna Johnson, owner of Southern California-based Luxury Designer, which has an office in Las Vegas, said those tastes have changed and the trend for homeowners with those style of homes is to de-Tuscanize them. The design has been losing luster since 2010, she said.

"Whether you're looking to sell your home or modernize your home, it's definitely a trend now," Johnson said. "They want less brown and gold and reds and the clutter of heavy furniture. All of that is the Tuscan world. A lot of people want to freshen up their homes and go with whiter walls and materials and cleaner looks. That's what people want to buy because the Tuscan homes aren't selling."

That's what Las Vegas Realtor Bruce Hiatt, owner of Luxury Realty Group, said he has been seeing in the Southern Nevada marketplace during the past year. Higher-priced Tuscan homes, even in high-end developments like Summerlin, are getting passed over by people opting for new construction with a more modern design and openness.

"For many years, you would see the Tuscan designs that everyone wanted with the stone on the outside and arches in the interior," Hiatt said. "I've had three clients in a row who came to us looking for resales. They didn't like what they were seeing (with the Tuscan homes) that had traditional living rooms and separate rooms. They wanted it more open. They weren't looking for a new home, but everyone ended up with one anyway."

That has prompted some owners of Tuscan homes to renovate them and put them back on the market to gain a sale, Hiatt said. Despite a lack of inventory on the existing home market, those older-style homes can sit unsold for several months while more contemporary designs are sold in a few weeks, he said.

"With new homes you can open the front door and see the glass looking out of the back of the house," Hiatt said. "You couldn't have done that years ago with these Tuscan design. You would see elegant stairway, but you couldn't see across the house or through the house. Every one of my clients said this is what they want."

Hiatt said one owner of a Tuscan home in Red Rock Country Club whom he spoke with wisely opted to take the home off the market and renovate the interior to compete with fresher designs in the new construction market. It's expected to be on the market in early 2018.

"I think that's very smart," Hiatt said. "We saw the potential in their existing home to do some changes and make it look more open and contemporary."

The homeowners realized they weren't going to get the \$650,000 to \$700,000 after talking with their neighbors who had a similar style home sitting on the market for a while, Hiatt said.

"We're seeing more and more renovations because people are getting nervous," Hiatt said. "We have seen so much new construction come on the market that it has raised the bar."

The homeowner plans to redo the kitchen by eliminating a wall and making it more open and integrated with living room and the rest of the house, Hiatt said. The wall wasn't load-bearing and could be removed without a great expense, Hiatt said. That's not always the case with other Tuscan homes.

Because the homeowner has family that works in construction trades, the renovation might not run more than \$40,000, Hiatt said. It's not unusual some major renovations can cost \$75,000 or more, he said.

"There are some houses you can't do much to improve the layout," Hiatt said. "And you have to assess where you live versus the return. You don't want to over upgrade in your neighborhood. In a lot of cases it's not worth it unless it's for homes of \$500,000 to \$600,000 and up. What we are seeing is you will get that back if you live in more upscale areas. You won't make a killer profit, but there is more potential of what you are going to get out of the home. Otherwise, you have to discount."

Some sellers have been off by \$100,000 to \$150,000 of the valuation they think they should get, Hiatt said.

Others believe they only need to change a countertop to get a sale, but those expectations are wrong as well, he said.

Not every home that's Tuscan can be made to a more contemporary design, especially if it has a lot of stone on the outside, Johnson said. Some covenants and homeowners association don't allow major changes and require a certain color of stone, she said.

In some cases, the exterior stone can be mortar washed to make it more modern, Johnson said. In some cases, stone can be removed and replaced with white stone, she said.

Ornate doors and stairwells can be replaced. Many Tuscan homes have dark-wood floors that can be sanded down and refinished. Wallpaper gives a more modern look, and walls can be repainted beige, gray or white, Johnson said.

"With white walls, everything looks fresh," Johnson said. "It is also a sign of wealth. If you have a white sofa and white walls, you can afford to take care of it is what they say."

For people who don't have a big budget to remodel, painting is a good alternative, Johnson said. Even removing heavy drapes and changing furniture pieces helps change a home, she said.

Many homes got cluttered with too much furniture.

"You can convert all at once, but there are easy ways to convert it slowly," Johnson said. "First, determine what your budget is and take it step by step. Remodeling the whole house is a big undertaking."

Damien Bauman, an area residential mortgage production manager with Nevada State Bank, said they're starting to see more homeowners inquire about de-Tuscanization of their homes. That wasn't the case a few years ago.

"We are hitting a market now where people are starting to see some equity in their home," Bauman said. "Where we were three years ago, people didn't have enough equity in their home where it penciled out. They're seeing it now based on the increased values in the market."