



Small Town Charm. Big Bright Future.

Expanding Outdoors

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When you live in an area where the weather is pretty good most of the year, it only makes sense to expand your living space outward. More and more, outdoor spaces are becoming extensions of indoor spaces. Patios, terraces, pool decks, and gardens provide places for gatherings, areas for families to unite, and quiet spots to find peace.

People are finding that spending time outdoors improves their overall health and wellness. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Time outdoors may also promote mental health and stress reduction." And what could be better than spending time outdoors without leaving your home to get there?

"Blurring the lines between indoors and out is a key element of residential and commercial buildings," says Fort Myers-based architect Joyce Owens. "Therefore, the spaces outside the buildings and the spaces between the buildings are as important as what is in the inside." Owens, whose AJO practice was founded in 2007, is a huge advocate of the climate-sensitive architectural style known as

tropical modern, described as minimalistic and in touch with the climatic needs of the environment. She and her firm naturally incorporate passive and active sustainable principles into all their projects.

“The connectivity between indoors and out has been amplified,” adds Owens, who uses the declining popularity of pool cages as an example, especially those located near a body of water. They are either disappearing altogether or being replaced with semi-screen porches, which have retractable screens, Owens notes.

Among the hottest trends for outdoor spaces is creating a harmony with nature. In 2022, the National Association of Home Builders reported that 58 percent of surveyed homeowners said a connection with nature, or the outdoors, would be of utmost importance in their design choices.

One of the ways homeowners can make the connection is by incorporating plants, trees, and shrubs, particularly native plants that are low maintenance and sustainable. The University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) offers a list of native plants that are recommended for this climate.

Plants can provide walls of privacy, as well as wind breaks and cooling shade. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, “Carefully positioned trees can save up to 25 percent of the energy a typical household uses.”

More homeowners are adding fruit trees and herb and vegetable gardens for fresh produce and savings on the grocery bill. The average garden is estimated to provide “300 pounds of fresh produce worth \$600,” according to a study by the National Gardening Association (NGA). The estimate was based on an average gardener’s investment of \$70.

Pergolas, trellises, baskets, planter boxes, and containers can also be incorporated into outdoor spaces to create a welcoming natural environment.

Many homeowners are creating walkways and paths or rock gardens using natural stone like granite, sandstone, and limestone or incorporating asymmetrical stones in the form of boulders and slabs as placement pieces in gardens along pathways. Outdoor water features such as fountains, waterfalls, water gardens, and koi ponds add to the sensory appeal.

While homeowners want to connect with nature, they also want to enjoy a luxurious staycation or a pampered escape to their own backyard. It’s all about upscale relaxation.

By incorporating comfy, durable outdoor furniture that looks like it belongs inside, there’s more of a desire to stay outside for longer periods. As more time is being spent outdoors, there is a greater need for storage areas. Built-in storage benches are a great way to tuck items into an easy-to-reach location that is out of view.



Also being added to the outside spaces are durable and attractive rugs, refreshing outdoor showers, big-screen televisions, fireplaces and wood-burning or gas firepits, backyard pizza ovens, and large kitchens and dining areas, turning the backyard into an oasis and an important social space.

These days outdoor kitchens are not only durable, but also aesthetically pleasing, mimicking their indoor counterparts. They may feature impressive natural stone countertops, bars with sinks, full sets of appliances, and grill islands that work as well as any indoor cooking range.

Another consideration is lighting. It’s essential to add porch lights and task lighting to outdoor kitchens and grill spaces. The dining and conversation areas can use candlelight, wall-mounted down lighting, and even outdoor chandeliers for porches, patios, and gazebos. Steps, pathways, and walkways should also be illuminated for safety and ambience. Solar and LED lights are good choices.

Mike Clarke of Cape Coral is happy with his decision to create a livable outdoor area. “As we have added a comfy outdoor space with a small kitchen and firepit, we have enjoyed a new social circle with our neighbors,” he says. “On many nights, we all gather around and chat. I’m enjoying the reconnection with community.”

One option for seamlessly connecting indoor and outdoor spaces is the installation of folding or sliding doors. These doors allow homeowners to open an entire wall to the outside. Sometimes they have a pocket, which makes them invisible when they’re open.

Whether it is off a bathroom, adjacent to the swimming pool, or both, an outdoor shower is a popular enhancement. It is also a great place to wash the beach sand off your feet. "Outdoor showers are thoughtfully and beautifully designed to feel like a trip to the spa," says architect Owens. Better yet, they can increase the value of your home. According to realtor.com, "Homes with the outside bathing areas saw a 97 percent price-per-square-foot premium, according to our research."

While decks remain ever-so-popular, placing a cover over them increases their utility many times over. "With covered deck protection, families and friends can enjoy eating and cooking outdoors every day—whether it's raining or too sunny or hot to sit outside," says Owens. Covered decks also add shade to help control cooling costs. Other options for cooling efficiency include solar shades, outdoor draperies, and umbrellas.

Hardwood decking material, such as redwood or cedar from the Pacific Northwest, or tropical hardwoods, such as ipe from Brazil, are rot resistant and last longer in this climate. Hardwoods with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) logo are guaranteed to come from forests that are managed for long-term sustainability.

Another option is plastic lumber and composites, which are popular as low-maintenance deck materials; better yet is environmentally friendly lumber made from post-consumer recycled plastic such as grocery bags and beverage containers.

Adding or updating a guest house makes sense for some, as many Floridians have frequent guests or visiting children. These guest houses can blend into the rest of the environment and incorporate many of the same sustainable features.

As backyard spaces become extensions of indoor living spaces, incorporating artwork is a good way to add a beautiful focal point and a conversation piece. It can also make an outdoor space feel more welcoming. Clayton Swartz of Swartz Art Gallery in Pinellas Park, Florida, creates sculptures out of aluminum and enamel to withstand the elements. "I cut, weld, grind, paint, and add a lustrous clear coat finish to all my sculptures," says Swartz.

His colorful artwork fits right into the current trend of lively and fun color palates and patterns. A sprinkling of bright pillows on the couch or a bold statement piece on the dining table can turn your outdoor space into an inviting extension of your home.

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