

Real Estate Monthly

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Making Your Home Accessible – and Attractive

A recent survey of 500 architecture firms in the United States conducted by the American Institute of Architects named accessibility as the fastest-growing trend in home design.

But as a generation in midlife embraces accessible design, it is eschewing clunky, institutional standbys such as stainless-steel bathroom grab bars in favour of subtle touches that blend into their home's decor: adjustable kitchen counters, for instance, and wider-open living spaces.

In other words, accessibility is in - but it had better be chic.

Popular features include lever door handles rather than knobs that are hard for arthritic hands to turn; cork floors that are easier on the joints than hardwood; easy-access tubs and showers, and kitchen counters low enough to sit down in front of while chopping vegetables.

Most importantly, everything has to blend with the home's look. Simple changes such as rounding the edges of kitchen counters or improving lighting can make a big difference in livability while actually contributing to a home's style.

Designers are aiming at boomers' vanity by pushing accessibility chic.

Some people resist when one designer tells them she refuses to install a fancy new tub without grab bars.

"It's not about being elderly, it's about being smart," says a Toronto designer to her reluctant clients. Then she explains that the bars can be colour-co-ordinated to the bathroom's decor.

Elevators are a particularly hot trend in high-end private homes. Elegant, wood-panelled doors make them look like just another room off a hallway. People who don't want an elevator might want to consider lining up closets vertically to create space for a future elevator shaft, just in



case.

Even younger generations are starting to think about accessibility. One Ottawa couple in their mid-30s, for example, are building a cottage with 90-centimetre-wide doorways and halls, a roll-in shower, and windows low enough to let someone in a wheelchair enjoy the views.

After reading an article about universal design, another term for accessible design, they realized that they could have both style and accessibility. They had always dreamed of building a cottage. They searched for the perfect plot of land for two years and have spent the past five years in construction. Making it wheelchair-accessible was just part of protecting their investment.

Focus on Ottawa Home Sales

According to statistics just released by the Ottawa Real Estate Board (OREB), 1,856 homes were sold in May, compared with 1,555 in April 2007. There were 1,661 sales in May 2006.

"Spring is always a great time to buy a home, and this year is no exception. Ottawa is an upbeat, vibrant place to be right now, and that excitement seems to be reflected in the housing market, with sales numbers up significantly over last May. Homes are also selling more quickly than they were last May. The Ottawa resale housing market continues to scale new heights," said OREB's President.

The average price of the homes sold in January in the Ottawa area was \$275,915, an increase of 6.3% over May 2006.

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Cottage Buyers, Take Note

Embarking upon the cottage-buying process can be daunting. Identifying and narrowing options are important first steps, as is aligning with a reputable real estate agent who knows the recreational area. There are many things to consider; outlined here are tips to keep in mind.

- Define your recreational needs (e.g. water sports or no sports, rustic or wired cottage, year-round or seasonal).
- Determine if the prospective cottage and/or area will satisfy those needs (e.g. big or small lake, rocky v. sandy shoreline, phone line accessibility).
- To really understand the area, vacation there.
- Educate yourself on the various water systems (e.g. septic tanks, wells and holding tanks).
- Find out what covenants/fees apply (e.g. road access, snow removal, etc.).
- What is the proximity to amenities (e.g. hospitals, grocery store, marina facilities)?
- Are you a north shore or south shore person? Do you want a sunrise or a sunset?
- Hire a professional home inspector (e.g. is the cottage's foundation solid? Can you build on it?)
- Determine what the local bylaws are with respect to building and permits.
- Spring/summer is a good time to buy because you can see the quality of the shoreline/water; however you will likely pay top dollar. If you buy in the fall, you are likely to get a better price.



Eco-Friendly Cottage Tips

The cottage is a special place where people live a little closer to nature. It is a place for peace, quiet, relaxation and restoration of the physical and spiritual self. By keeping your environment around the cottage natural and healthy, you also contribute to your own personal well-being. Here are a few tips to keep in mind.

- when creating a new cabin, leave a natural, undeveloped buffer strip between the lake shore and the developed area. This area will provide wildlife habitat, protect water quality, and give you greater privacy.
- use natural cedar shakes for roofing or consider a long-lasting metal roof.
- when creating a deck or outdoor stairs, consider using recycled plastic wood – it has great longevity and doesn't need painting.
- leave the shoreline in its natural condition; don't build an artificial beach or add new sand to an existing beach.
- use biodegradable soaps to protect the water quality.
- use low-flow faucet aerators and a toilet dam to reduce water usage.
- use a canoe or kayak to enjoy the lake, rather than a motorboat
- don't use disposable dishes and cutlery.
- turn taps off tightly and repair leaks immediately.
- have items repaired instead of throwing them away; donate them to local charities.
- use fluorescent light bulbs to cut down on energy use.
- replace your old wood stove with a more efficient model.