

Invest in Your Nest

Okay, so the housing bubble burst, home values are plummeting, and the money mavens say it's gonna get worse before it gets better. What to do? Invest, of course, in the place you call home.

BY: LAWRENCE LANAHAN



Let's get the bad news out of the way: Sales of single-family homes in Westchester decreased 26.7 percent between the second quarter of 2007 and the second quarter of 2008, according to the Westchester-Putnam Multiple Listing Service (WPMLS). As if that's not disheartening enough, the median price (that is, the mid-point of all reported sales) of a single-family home also dropped in the same period, from \$700,000 to \$674,900. And inventory is up 10.6 percent—that's 443 houses on the market that weren't there a year earlier.

If you were hoping to sell but decided to wait for a rebound, you might be staying put for a while. Even the rosiest prognostications say we've got a long way to go; there are simply too many factors at work, all tunneling into market stability like termites. The Westchester County Board of Realtors in a recent newsletter proclaimed that "foreclosures, mortgage interest rates, credit availability, unemployment, the Manhattan real estate market...are not radiating wellness."

Well, "not radiating wellness" is one way to put it. Might as well come right out and say it: real estate-wise, life is giving you lemons. And when that happens, you renovate the kitchen in which you make your lemonade. The fact is, whether you're planning to sell or stay, experts say it makes sense to invest in your abode. "When things get

tough, instead of selling and buying a different house, homeowners do upgrades,” declares Mark LePage, president of residential architecture firm Fivecat Studio in Pleasantville. “It is great for resale.”

And take heart, not all upgrades are costly. “It’s the simple things that get the highest return on investment,” says Mark Boyland, president of WPMLS. “New carpeting and new paint are fairly low-cost improvements that can get you two dollars for every dollar you spend.”

This article will help you figure out which upgrades will give you the biggest bang for your buck and make you and your family happier—more comfortable, more proud, and even more virtuous (yeah, we’re gonna get into the “green” thing)—in your home for as long as you care to stay. As you consider renovations—we’d rather call them investments—don’t worry so much about the market. Because when the market picks up, a house with a brand-new kitchen and an expanded master bedroom suite will sell for more than a home with a dinky kitchen and an uninviting bedroom. So put away those local real estate listings. And pick up some blueprints.

Kitchens

The heart of your home.

“A new kitchen will return about eighty-five cents on a dollar,” declares WPMLS’s Mark Boyland. “It may mean the difference between selling and not selling.” Sam Owen, owner of Garth Custom Kitchens in Scarsdale, is even more positive. “In my experience, in a good economy, you always get your money back on a kitchen renovation. It’s the most important room in the house.”

In September of last year, the National Kitchen & Bath Association predicted that Americans would spend more than \$96 billion renovating approximately 7.6 million kitchens by the end of 2007, even though the housing market continued to decline.

To increase the value and enjoyment of your kitchen, think beyond cabinets and sinks. Think lifestyle. “The best improvement you can make is to improve the space,” says Jason Landau of Amazing Spaces, LLC, an interior design firm in Briarcliff Manor. And improve the lighting. Large windows and skylights can make a kitchen a brighter and more welcoming social space, as can islands (peninsulas are out) and vaulted ceilings.

A mid-range kitchen renovation can be had for as low as \$65,000. “On a three hundred-square-foot kitchen, this price would include good quality wood cabinetry, quality granite or quartz countertops, and installation,” says Owen, “but does not include appliances, flooring, backsplashes, plumbing, or electric.” Start knocking down walls and throwing in high-end touches like \$50,000 cabinets, a separate Sub-Zero freezer and refrigerator, and a Viking range, and you can easily eclipse \$150,000. Either way, you can expect to recoup about 70 percent right away, according to the 2007 Cost vs. Value Report published by Remodeling Magazine and the National Association of Realtors.



5 cool options for today's kitchen

The possibilities are endless and they depend on your taste and budget, but here are some favorite kitchen options from local home remodelers and kitchen designers.

1 A Separate Refrigerator and Freezer

"If you have the space, a separate refrigerator and freezer are nice," says Owen of Garth Custom Kitchens. "So is a small beverage refrigerator for the kids."

What It'll Cost: The stainless-steel Sub-Zero 36" All Refrigerator goes for around \$6,000 at Prisco's Video TV & Appliance in White Plains, and it's another \$6,000 for a stainless-steel Sub-Zero 36" All Freezer.

To Save a Little: At Prisco's, the General Electric Monogram 36" Built-In All Refrigerator costs about \$5,600, as does the Monogram 36" Built-In All Freezer.

To Save a Lot: Reconsider the built-ins. Cabinet-depth refrigerators can look virtually built-in and are much less expensive. For \$1,900, Sears offers the 32" Kenmore PRO Professional Size Refrigerator. It's another \$1,900 to add the 32" Kenmore PRO Professional Size Freezer.

2 Dovetail Drawer Boxes

If you've ever had the front of a drawer fall off, you probably were not pulling on a drawer with dovetail joints. Dovetail joinery, an indicator of good craftsmanship, makes cabinetry stronger and sturdier. "I've seen articles forever recommending this," says Chuck Conti, owner of Westchester Kitchen & Bath in Peekskill. Fortunately, in most mid-level and higher-quality kitchen drawers, dovetail joinery "is almost standard now," says Owen.

To Save: You can knock off a third of the price by going from custom to semi-custom. Additionally, since late summer, Owen reports, "almost all of the cabinet manufacturers are offering incentives, such as reducing the premiums on better woods by fifty percent, so you can now get cherry, for instance, for the price of a lesser-quality wood."

To Save More: By going from semi-custom to stock, you can save another 33 percent.

3 48-Inch Range

Two ovens, six burners, a grill, and a griddle all in one spot? Who doesn't want that? Viking and Wolf are the big names in pro ranges. But, says Laura Sperandio of Bilotta Kitchens in Mamaroneck, "All the lines are making pro-type ranges."

What It'll Cost: Nick Prisco, CEO of Prisco's Video TV & Appliance, recommends Wolf over Viking and says a 48" Wolf range costs around \$7,500.

To Save: GE's Monogram 48" pro range runs around \$5,000, which certainly isn't as costly as Wolf or Viking.

4 Radiant Floor Heating

Radiant floor heating, which uses tubes or cables to send heat up from under the floor, is efficient, comfortable, quiet, invisible, and distributes heat evenly unlike other types of heating—baseboard or forced air (ductwork)—which can take up valuable cabinet space and heat the kitchen unevenly. "We try to do it in every kitchen," says LePage of Fivecat Studio.

What It'll Cost: For hydronic (water-based) radiant floor heating, LePage says to expect to pay \$20 per square foot. After it's in, turn your thermostat down when you're in the kitchen to save on energy bills.

To Save: Electric radiant floor heating is less expensive to install but more expensive to use. Still, it can be an inexpensive complement to your main heating source if used occasionally.

5 An Island

"Island kitchens are far and away popular beyond any other design," says Kelly Stewart, director of sales and development for Kitchens by Deane in Stamford and New Canaan, Connecticut. You get better work flow—and traffic flow—more counter space, and a central gathering point for family and friends.

To Save: Ditch the sink and appliances to shave off anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000.

To Save Even More: Go with a smaller island that functions more like a table with little or no cabinetry.

To Save a Ton: Just pick up a small mobile island. Home Depot offers the 38" by 44" Catskill Craftsmen Super Island Plus for \$859. It includes raised-panel doors and a drop leaf. If you are on a tight budget, a mobile cart will give you some counter space, a little storage, and some flexibility in your kitchen's flow.

ONE KITCHEN, TWO SINKS



Mystic Martini Sink from Elkay

If you have the space—and the need—experts say consider two sinks. Two sinks allow two people to work simultaneously without getting in each other's way. Besides, they're cool-looking. What else is cool? Custom stove hoods, 48-inch ranges, Silestone countertops. If you are thinking about resale, though, stick with the classics for your countertop. Black granite countertops aren't going out of style anytime soon, says Owen, "and quartz materials are gaining in popularity for countertops because they don't require sealing." For cabinets, stick with cherry, maple, or even white paint; all are beautiful, sturdy, and timeless.

what's In, what's Out

IN: A sink with a sculptural design: stainless troughs in snaking silhouettes by Elkay; keyhole shapes in cast-iron and enamel from Kohler; custom options like embossed or hammered copper sinks scooped out of soapstone countertops or hand-painted ceramics. Also, green elements, such as bamboo, cork, and recycled wood flooring; products made from reused or recycled materials such as solid-surface countertops like PaperStone, Richlite, shetkaSTONE, IceStone, and EnviroGLAS; environmentally friendly paints and finishes with low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) ratings.

OUT: Not much! Local designers, however, cite a decreased demand for oak cabinets and apron-front sinks. Lacquer cabinets are out, as are strong or harsh color combinations such as red and black or teal and black. White

or bisque appliances aren't generating much interest, either. The ultimate "out?" "Trophy" kitchens that are never used. —Elzy Kolb

The Master Suite

Your Sanctuary

Ahhh, your bedroom. The tranquility. The serenity. Your bedroom is not just where you sleep; it's often where you go to escape. So why not have a luxurious, spacious, ultra-comfortable master suite to run to? A suite is much more attractive to potential homebuyers than a master bedroom with one standard closet and a standard bathroom.

"Especially for clients with kids," says architect Mark LePage, "a master bedroom suite becomes a refuge."

However you use the space, some features "wow" more than others. "The most desirable features in a master bedroom," says Karen Kline, owner of Spice Hill Interiors in Ossining, "are a state-of-the-art TV and sound system, ambient lighting on dimmers, a dressing area, makeup area, or separate dressing room adjunct to or included in the closet area or bathroom."



In the master suite, there are two surefire components guaranteed to knock socks off: a killer closet, dressing room, or combination of both and a spa-like master bathroom.

What does a master bathroom need to be considered "spa-like?" "Radiant heat and heated towel bars, two sinks, large medicine/storage cabinets, a steam shower, and a spa tub," Kline answers. Verboten: old Jacuzzi-style tubs with their metal jets. "They've become outdated," warns Kline, noting that the newer spa tubs are perforated (no nasty jets to jab

you), so that they disperse air evenly throughout the tub. Spa tubs are available with integrated pillows; hydro-thermal massage that combines water, air, and heat; and a number of "therapies": chromatherapy, which allows you to control the color of your bath water; aromatherapy, so that you can add scented essential oils into the water for maximum relaxation; thermotherapy, which controls the temperature of the water in the tub once it's filled; and sound-therapy, that is, wall-mounted MP3 players that come with wireless, waterproof headphones.

"The master bathroom is really a place to go to relax, not just wash up," LePage says.

Remodeling Magazine's 2007 Cost vs. Value Report pegs a typical upscale master suite addition at about \$220,000.

But given that the median size of listed Westchester County homes is 34 percent larger than the national median (2,400 vs. 1,795 square feet), it will cost you a bit more. LePage says the additions he sees tend to run about 1,000 square feet, and he suggests \$250 per square foot as a ballpark figure for additions and renovations. WPMLS's Boyland estimates that, in Westchester County, a well-done major kitchen and bath renovation will recoup up to 85 percent in resale value.

the appeal of a show-stopping shower

Anthony Cucciniello, president of 4V Construction & Management Corporation in New Rochelle, recommends installing an extra-large shower in a master bathroom. Lay a stone surface, enclose it in lots of glass, and fill it up with the best fixtures: a seat, double showerheads, steam, and extra sprinklers. "They pulsate from the sides," says Thomas J. Ralph, principal broker at Thomas J. Ralph Real Estate in New Rochelle, "like a car wash."

Steam showers, body sprays, rain heads, hand-held showerheads, and massaging heads all add to the appeal of a shower. What material to use for your show-stopping shower (and/or bathroom)? "Granite, marble, ceramic, in that order," says Ralph.

Closet Designers' Bedroom Essentials AND WHAT THEY WILL COST YOU

"Some must-have items are see-through glass doors with interior lighting [\$150 to \$300], a pullout pants rack [\$190], a built-in melamine hamper with a chrome basket [\$300], and a pullout tie drawer [\$200]."

—Liz Sleeman, Sales Manager, California Closets, Hawthorne

"The most important thing is, maximize your hanging and shelving space. A nice item to have is a double velvet-lined jewelry tray [\$150]."

—Stefanie Stein, President, Alternative Closets,

Mount Kisco

"A five-foot mahogany dressing table [\$1,000] and a freestanding mahogany bench, which can be converted into a hamper [\$500], are great additions."

—Joe Schneider, Owner,

Closets Plus, Pleasantville

"A shoe-storage system is essential. A cherry-wood shoe rack with a fifty-shoe capacity [\$600 to \$900] is a great item. Other items that would be terrific for a closet include a built-in wall safe with a digital face [\$600 - \$1,000], a valet rod [\$50], a full-length mirror with a hard wood frame [\$300], and a forty-two-inch ironing board with a swivel option and raised-panel front [\$650]."

—Sharon Gallerani, Co-owner and Vice President, Closet Factory, Bridgeport, CT

COLOR: PLAY IT SAFE

Yes, creams and whites are still the colors of choice for bathrooms. Ditto natural materials such as slate, stone, and glass. And what else? Kline of Spice Hill Interiors agrees that neutral tones lend a spa-like feel, as do "beautiful porcelain tiles in larger sizes [12" x 24" or 24" x 24"]; they give a cleaner feeling because there's less grout."

MASTER BEDROOM-CUM-FAMILY ROOM

Some families prefer to include their children's needs



in their master bedroom suite design or renovation plans. “Homeowners may want to reach beyond the primary people who use the room,” says Spice Hill Interiors’s Kline. She designed a master bedroom suite “that had seating for five so their kids could come in and watch a movie.” Master bedrooms, according to Kline, call for some type of auxiliary seating area. “Some people even use a master bedroom almost as a second family room,” she says.



The Great Outdoors

Curb Appeal Plus



You only get to make one first impression. The good news is, when it comes to a home, a good first impression is relatively easy—and inexpensive—to pull off. It all comes down to one simple real estate tenet: curb appeal.

“Curb appeal is huge in any market,” says WPMLS’s Mark Boyland, “because buyers know almost within seconds” whether they’re interested in a house, just from looking at the outside. “They get a gut reaction. So if they like it from the outside, you’re halfway there. That’s

true in any type of market in any price range.”

The top four “cost-recouped” projects in Remodeling Magazine’s 2007 Cost vs. Value Report are all outdoor renovations. A typical project to replace siding, estimated at \$9,910, improved resale value by \$8,245—83.2 cents on the dollar. Wood-deck additions and window replacements all recouped more than 75 percent.

Every outdoor upgrade has its own particular advantages. Siding lasts long and is low-maintenance. New windows improve energy efficiency, driving down monthly utility bills. But they all share curb appeal. “If the front of the house looks appealing, the whole house is perceived at a higher value,” says LePage. As buyers approach and enter the house, they should see nice landscaping and a fresh paint job. They should walk on quality decking and open an attractive door with a sturdy knob.

5 Biggest No-Nos for Your Front and Back Yard

We talked to some local landscape designers to help you avoid common, costly mistakes.

1 Do not start work until you know your town’s rules.

Make sure you’ve got a permit for everything you need. “You’d be surprised—in some towns you can’t take a tree down without a permit,” says Scarsdale landscape designer Yellen. “Every town is different.”

2 Do not plant invasive species.

They're bad for the local ecosystem, and they'll get out of control on your land. The barberry is one notorious—and popular—invasive. And don't rely on the labeling at the nursery, warns Yellen. "If they call it a 'very vigorous spreader,' do not plant it. They'll never call it 'invasive.'"

3 Do not plant along the edge of your yard until you know exactly where your property line is.

Using plants and trees as a screen is a nice way to improve an unpleasant view, but don't let it turn into a nightmare. "I've seen so many lawsuits," says Kevin Bielik of Daniel Sherman Landscape Architect, PC. "They'll take down a tree they thought was theirs, and it belonged to their neighbor."

4 Do not hire an uninsured contractor.

"Lots of guys just drive a truck with a name on the side of it," says Bielik. "If they get hurt on your job, you're liable. This is a big thing."

5 Make sure your landscaper knows what (s)he is doing.

Make sure he lays the right amount of mulch. "Two inches max," says Bielik.

Make sure he knows your soil. "Does it need acidic or alkaline soil?" says Bielik.

Make sure he knows how big will your plant or tree grow. Landscape architect Daniel Sherman remembers someone putting in a row of pines along the driveway 20 years ago. "Its purpose was as a screen," he says. "Now they're two stories in the air...you can see right into the neighbor's garage."

Let It Grow

When planting, experts say, less is more. Don't be afraid to pull everything out and start over again. "If the front of the house is a lot of overgrown shrubs, it can make the house look dark and dingy," says Elaine Yellen, a landscape designer in Scarsdale. Yellen says the best bang for your buck is "foundation planting"—the plants you put directly around your house. "Changing that is probably the most cost-effective thing to do," she says.

Dan Sherman, a landscape designer in Valhalla, points out that what you do outside can have an effect inside. If any part of your view is unpleasant—say, your neighbor's pink flamingo collection—he suggests lining the border of your yard with azaleas and hollies to create a screen. You can also remove trees to let more sunshine into your house.

The yard can even be a way of extending the house. "Patios are like outdoor rooms," says Sherman. Yellen says a good patio can be used nine or ten months out of the year for entertaining, family dining, and cooking. "If you enjoy being outside, but there's no comfy place to sit," she says, "think about a new patio."

inexpensive ways to increase curb appeal



Mark Boyland, with the county's multiple listing service, says that home-owners looking to make a return on investment should "avoid pumping a lot of money into the exterior." Instead, he recommends: "Have the house power-washed and make sure the yard is well-manicured, that the lawn is mowed, that the leaves and sticks are picked up, and that the house looks fresh. You don't need to spend thousands of dollars on elaborate landscaping."

go easy on hardscaping



Landscape Elaine Yellen cautions that homeowners should be careful about using concrete outdoors. What she calls "hardscaping"—driveways, patios, walkways—is more expensive, and certainly more permanent, than plants and flowers. If you do hardscaping, choose natural materials—as opposed to concrete. Recommended: any stone—gravel, granite, bluestone, limestone, etc. "Choosing pavers that other people might consider tacky...it can be too personal and specific," says Sherman.

Green Living

Your Pocketbook & Ethics

"If I had to guess, in upcoming years I'd be shocked if going green is not a very big selling point," says Marc Gerber, an associate broker with Tri-Crest Realty in Eastchester. Although green renovations are not yet paying for themselves, if you are dropping six figures on renovating your house, you may as well spend a little more to ensure a minimal impact on the environment. Plus, if you stay long enough, you'll make money on the deal.

But, of course you can't go green overnight. "You go green in shades of gray," says Tom McCracken, principal owner of Carpistry, a Manhattan-based green renovation company.

Stephen Tilly, principal owner of Stephen Tilly, Architect, in Dobbs

Ferry, advises: "Start with the basics. Don't build more than you have to. If you are looking to expand your house, see if there is any unutilized space and you may discover that you don't have to build more than you originally planned."

Some green renovations are more valuable than others. "Solar panels add value right away," says architect LePage. Thus, consider renewable energy sources such as solar thermal (a technology that extracts heat from the sun using flat plates or collectors; it costs about \$10,000 to install but with tax credit, you can get almost half of that money back) and solar photovoltaic energy (energy used to convert solar energy into electricity; this costs upwards of \$40,000, but you can get approximately 50 percent back in tax credit).

But simply improving the system isn't enough. Get an energy audit to see where your house is leaking air. Then seal the envelope. "Pick the low-hanging fruit first," such as weather stripping and insulation, says Barrett Silver, sales manager at Mercury Solar Systems in New Rochelle. You can also replace old windows and even insulate a



freestanding hot water heater. Tilly says, “Make the house tight. Caulk your windows and doors, seal your fireplace and attic dampers, fix that pesky leak in the joint between the basement and first floor. A professional can come and secure your whole house for a few thousand dollars.” According to Silver, “It pays back right away. You’ll notice it this winter.” Besides, he notes, “one thing a prospective buyer can ask is, ‘Can I see your utility bills?’”

McCracken also recommends a highly programmable heating and cooling system that you can control room by room.

“If you have a choice in insulation between using some sort of nasty fiberglass material and spending a dollar more per square foot on organic cotton, use the organic cotton,” says Tom McCracken of Capistry. Because cotton is a renewable energy source and fiberglass has harmful carcinogens cotton is the better choice.

5 easy ways to turn your home green

1 Replace your incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs, the ones with the ENERGY STAR label. Although each bulb may be a few dollars more than its wasteful counterpart, its average lifespan is eight to 15 times longer and can save you more than 20 percent on electric bills.

2 Install a solar water heater. Says Keith Christensen, partner at EarthKind Energy in Rhinebeck, New York: “Solar thermal—the ‘other solar’—is a fraction of the cost of solar electric. And it takes very little room on your roof and has a fast payback.”

3 Recycle your cellphones by either donating them to be used in Third World countries or broken down so the material can be reused. According to New Rochelle resident Rob Feuer, president of geothermal installation company Smart Energy, “The power we waste by leaving them around could provide energy for one-hundred thousand homes!”

4 Install a solar air heater on an external south wall. This will, says Christensen, “bring the heat from the sun into your house during the winter—heat for free ‘all sunny day long’! Your solar thermal ‘oil replacement’ [or gas or electric] will equal less than three dollars a gallon for twenty-five years—and less than two dollars per gallon with the tax credits.”

5 Install geothermal heating. “Though it’s expensive and not that easy, it’s great for the long run: it will save you between fifty to sixty percent on all your utility costs,” says Feuer.

—Samuel S. Saltman

Is That Bamboo Really Green?

If you want to be sure that the wood for your home is really green, look for these three letters: FSC, followed by the word “certified.” Otherwise, odds are good it ain’t really green. If it’s FSC certified (FSC stands for Forest Stewardship Council, a non-profit organization that promotes the “responsible management” of forests), it essentially has got tree-huggers’ seal of approval. Otherwise, even if it’s fast-growing highly-replenishable bamboo, it’s probably not really “green.” To be truly green, wood has to be grown pesticide-free, be harvested at maturity, and be processed with non-formaldehyde adhesives, among other things.

GO GEOTHERMAL



One of the most expensive renewable energy technologies is geothermal, which tunnels hundreds of feet into the Earth for stable temperatures to heat and cool your home. Architect Stephen Tilly explains that geothermal energy uses heat from beneath the Earth's surface to heat/cool your house using wells and pipes to extract or give off the heated water. The number of wells a home may require depends on its size and insulation, but generally three or four are needed. The wells cost \$10,000 to \$12,000 each to install. The California Energy Commission says a geothermal system runs about \$2,500 per ton of capacity, and drilling can run into the five figures. Depending on a home's current energy costs, it could take more than a decade to pay itself off. But Tom McCracken of green renovation company Carpistry says, "Geothermal is brilliant. It's the best, in my opinion."