

# The Specialists Deliver



*A sub-category of the building profession has emerged; there are now specialists who can deliver the perfect Outdoor Room®, from concept to completion.*

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The most important element for a successful Outdoor Room is the interview, an in-depth conversation between homeowner and designer. Top-drawer Outdoor Room designers emphasize this must be the initial step. That conversation provides the foundation for all that follows.

Only then, designers say, can a truly exceptional Outdoor Room evolve, a beautiful Outdoor Room that meets the needs and expectations of its owners.

*Hearth & Home* interviewed Outdoor Room designers in California, Virginia and Florida, all of whom work at the highest levels in their markets. Their Outdoor Room construction budgets sometimes exceed \$1 million, though they may undertake projects with quite modest budgets.

California landscape designer Drew Sivgals has tackled "extraordinarily small projects of \$10,000 to \$20,000." Most of his Outdoor Room projects, however, come in around \$300,000. His process is the same for all: Get to know the client.

"Clients come with a general idea of what's important to them, how they want to live," he explains. Given the opportunity, clients will reveal information that informs how the designer should proceed. Sivgals says his challenge is to process the clients' tastes and opinions and "reflect that back" in his design.

"I've learned that to listen to the client is paramount, rather than pushing my own thoughts," he says. "Clients are becoming more and more savvy and specific about their design goals and needs."

Ryan Hughes, based in Florida, shares that same philosophy in dealing with clients. "We approach it from a lifestyle aspect first," he explains. "We have to get to know them to design the space around them."

When he specifies a certain type of furniture for an Outdoor Room, the choices are based on clues and direct statements gleaned from his clients. "We've interviewed them and gotten a feel for their style, for what they may or may not like," he says. "We get a sense of their vision."

Understanding the client's lifestyle goals clarifies how budgets should be used. Ken Duffy's firm, Geoscape, is in Northern Virginia, where his projects may range from \$40,000 to \$750,000 or more.

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“My job is figuring out the best use of my client’s money,” he says. “I don’t want to overspend on one thing and not have enough left to finish the job at the same level.”

Sometimes clients insist on making expenditures despite the designer’s objections. “I had one client pay \$53,000 for a single tree,” says Sivgals, whose AMS Landscape Design Studios are in Newport Beach, California. “I tried to talk them out of it.”

Like Duffy, Sivgals prefers to maximize the use of his client’s money, regardless of how much is in the budget. “It’s not so much about the dollar

them into the adjoining Outdoor Room, suggesting continuity and the sense of a unified, flowing space.

If an interior room has exposed beams or a coffered ceiling, he’s likely to continue that theme under the roof of the Outdoor Room.

The choice of flooring is the most obvious consideration; a uniform flooring material is one of the simplest ways to make cohesive spaces. But Shippy considers all elements of a living space to strengthen the inside-outside connections.

“We’re really taking the outside in, trying to bring the outdoor living landscape inward,” he says. “When you

greatest key ingredient to what makes a good design,” Sivgals says.

When the Outdoor Room designer considers an addition to an existing home, creating those sight lines probably means moving windows and doors to enlarge passages between in and out. “A major goal of any good design is to play off those sight lines,” he says. “If you are at the kitchen sink, what are you looking at?”

It’s equally important to consider sight lines from the main entrance all the way through to the Outdoor Room, designers say. An uninterrupted view leads the eye, drawing residents as well as visitors to that inviting space. It makes the home appear larger and more inviting.

### Pulling the Trigger

In a perfect world, an Outdoor Room concept would be developed in conjunction with an architect’s plans for a residence. Architect, Outdoor Room designer, homeowner, and builder would collaborate from the outset. This approach theoretically would produce a fully featured new home constructed on a single timeline. Additionally, this approach should realize some construction efficiencies.

Realistically, however, that rarely happens.

“Home builders are not on board with what we do,” says Hughes. “They do not like the fact that one guy, like us, comes in and handles the entire process” of Outdoor Room construction.

As a result, Ryan Hughes Designs generally tackles Outdoor Room projects on existing residences. Sometimes that means removing an exterior façade and changing windows and doors on a new home that has never been occupied.

Hughes says his firm has a residential contractor’s license that would allow the company to handle a turnkey home construction project. But that’s not what his company is about. “We can build houses,” he says. “We have no desire to.”

He prefers to keep things manageable and focused as a specialty service provider. “We want to be more of a boutique company and maintain strong relationships with clients throughout the process,” he says.

Hughes grew up in a landscaping business started by his father, who he says always emphasized creativity and “changed the face of landscaping in Florida.” The son came on board in



*Geoscape Landscape Construction, Lake Forest, California.*

amount,” he says, “it’s what can be done with it. It’s shocking how fast the money goes.”

Today’s savvy consumers have a heightened appreciation for how good design can enhance the indoor-outdoor lifestyle relationship, Sivgals says. “They want it to work both ways,” he says. “We didn’t see that 10 years ago. But because of websites and home shows, people see what is possible.”

John Shippy, whose Geoscape Landscape Construction is in Lake Forest, California, strives to make connections, interior-to-exterior, with his Outdoor Room designs. He picks up on elements inside the residence and incorporates

open up a wall, you want to take that family room and connect it to the outside. You want to continue those kinds of features, inside, to the outside.”

Lighting treatments and climate control are important elements to ensure design continuity.

“All of our projects have flush-mounted electric heaters,” he says. Gas heaters, in his opinion, are too large and cumbersome for elegant designs. He says heaters are necessary in Southern California, where “it definitely gets chilly in the evening. You’re able to keep that perfect 75-degree heat even in the middle of winter.”

Providing for long sight lines is “the

1999 and expanded the business to include pools and, eventually, Outdoor Rooms.

"In 2008, we were a \$12 million company with 125 employees," he says. "I found myself doing nothing but running the business and was no longer on the creative side at all."

The Great Recession provided an opportunity to reorient the company with a mission "to redefine the industry." By 2012, he says, "Things got good again. Since then it's just been phenomenal."

Duffy, in Virginia, also finds working with homebuilders during construction to be problematic. "They have their package and the way they do it. They will make small modifications," but extensive changes necessary for a seamless integration of indoor and outdoor living spaces usually can't be negotiated.

As a result, he says, his Outdoor Room projects typically don't commence until the homeowner "is in the house and the builder is gone."

The California landscape designers report having an easier time working with homebuilders and architects. Time will tell if that trend will spread eastward, as so many California innovations do.

Sivgals says that his firm is engaged along with architects and interior designers during the initial design stage about 60 percent of the time. "As the house is being designed," he says, "we also think about the outside and that relationship. Getting someone like myself onboard while the house is being designed can have huge benefits."

Trained as a landscape designer, Sivgals emphasizes that, "Plantings and lighting are more important than the hardscape material." Today's clientele understands this, he says. "They are more aware of the key ingredients that make up a good design, even on a tight budget."

Some of Shippy's Outdoor Room budgets are stratospheric.

One recent project involved landscaping and a jaw-dropping Outdoor Room for a new home with a construction budget of \$45 million. Shippy says his "slice was in the \$5 million to \$8 million range."

He began working early on with the project architect. "We figured out all the garden features and how they connected with the home. We also had influence on what the home looked like, right down to the lighting fixtures." As a result, he says, the Outdoor Room "was very well connected, architecturally."

A project of that scale is a universe away from his first landscaping venture:

"A real basic sprinkler system, some plants, and some small brick walls. Every project just got more and more elaborate."

Shippy's firm employs about 20 people focused on design and administrative tasks. For project management and construction, he says, "I use specialized

- Pop-up televisions. There's a place for televisions away from the bar and entertainment wall, but the flat screen TV no longer hangs in plain sight. "We went through a phase where if you had a fireplace, you had a TV above it," Shippy says. But no more. He now builds counters



AMS Landscape Design Studios, Newport Beach, California.

guys in all the different categories."

As evidenced by the work of these designers, Outdoor Room features continue to evolve at a rapid pace, fueled by creativity as well as technology. Shippy mentioned several items popular with his clients:

- LED ribbon lighting. "The lights are so small, literally the thickness of Scotch tape, that you can put them in all kinds of places," he says. Examples include installing LED lights under shelving and counters or across the face of a bar "that can be accented in stone, or tile, or teak, or glass mosaic."
- Entertainment walls. Imagine an island, he says, facing a bar set-up with open shelves and a TV mounted on the wall, with a soffit above. "It's a sit-down area, the sports game is on, and the beer taps are flowing." The grill, which once would have been front and center, is installed off to one side, keeping heat and smoke away from guests.

or low walls that conceal a flat screen TV, mounted on a motorized lift. It rises into viewing position at the touch of a button.

- Apps for everything. Lighting, audio systems, fountains and fire features often may be controlled by smartphone application. Tired of white lights in the pool? With LEDs, one can change the color on a whim. "There's an app you can use," Shippy says. "Just move your finger around the color wheel."
- Clean design. "We went through that crazy, Old World phase," he says. "Now we're seeing a turn toward cleaner, simplistic lines. The aesthetic is far more modern."

The designers admit that creating Outdoor Rooms for existing homes presents their industry's greatest opportunity. "There are millions of houses that weren't done correctly," says Hughes. "The inside is done beautifully, and the back yard is average."

Though based in Florida, Hughes has created Outdoor Rooms for homes in North Carolina and Canada. He describes the project in a Toronto suburb as “one of my most over-the-top spaces.” The completed job ran into seven figures.

The designers emphasize that a pleasing Outdoor Room project always begins with a qualified Outdoor Room designer and an in-depth, designer-client conversation.

“Nobody should build an outdoor living space without a design,” Hughes says. “Nobody would build a house without a professional and a blueprint.”


The conversation steers everything that follows, says Sivgals, who as a student won an internship with Walt Disney Imagineering, the design and development arm of The Walt Disney Company. That’s where he learned to “really look at the entire environment of a space,” he says, “down to the last square inch.”

The client interview can’t be superficial. A careful designer will probe deeply, looking for details that ensure he’s on the right path to meet his client’s expectations.



Ryan Hughes Design, Palm Harbor, Florida.

Sometimes a client may express a desire for a “very contemporary style,” Sivgals says, “but show me furniture that is transitional. That shows me how modern they really want to go. It helps me clarify the scope of the design.”

The goal, always, is creating the perfect Outdoor Room for that particular client’s lifestyle. Because, as Hughes says, an Outdoor Room done right “will be the No. 1 destination of the home.” 



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