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by Laurie Rudd

AL FRESCO DÉCOR

DESIGN CHANNEL EXTENDS TO EXTERIORS



Creating complete outdoor spaces including exterior structures and furnishings are services delivered by Ryan Hughes Design Build.

THE DESIGNER CATEGORY HAS BECOME AN important distribution channel with the ability to further define outdoor décor through commercial and residential applications.

“There is a demand for professional designers that not only design outdoor spaces, but also furnish and accessorize them,” said Ryan Hughes, owner of Ryan Hughes Design Build, Palm Harbor, Fla. “When you are able to get your clients to understand the lifestyle enhancement a well-planned outdoor living space provides, then the opportunities are endless.”

Casual Living’s recent research shows this demand has grown to represent millions

of dollars in outdoor product sales, all facilitated by independent interior design professionals as well as exterior design-build operations.

Although Hughes’ company offers both construction and décor, those in the exterior contract design field are predominantly interior design professionals applying their talents to outdoor spaces in increasing numbers. The knowledge and inspiration these designers apply to interiors naturally flows to exterior projects.

“My jobs are usually an outgrowth of an interior project,” said Kris Wichern, owner of Interiors by Kris, Round Hill, Va. “I see a continuing market for outdoor living spaces to be

just as beautiful as the indoors, and I now see it as something to offer all of my clients.”

Design professionals throughout this channel unanimously recognize that they are perfectly positioned to take advantage of the popularity of outdoor décor and are embracing the growth potential it holds for their businesses.

LOCATION, LOCATION

Opportunities in exterior contract design are often a function of the firm’s location. For designers located in Florida, 95% to 100% of residential or commercial projects include furnishings and space planning for exterior spaces. “We have always been involved in the exterior décor as our work

is generally from the inception of the design,” said Faith Fix, Freestyle Interiors, Bonita Springs, Fla. “The exterior is a natural extension of the interior and should reflect the design concept of the interior.”

Further inland or within urban locales, requests for outdoor projects continue to be a substantial portion of overall work. “This past year, approximately 30% have had an exterior décor element,” said Steve McKenzie, owner of Steve McKenzie’s, based in Atlanta. “Some of our design jobs have been solely exterior.” McKenzie feels the display and sale of casual outdoor furniture in his showroom have been the catalyst for additional exterior design jobs.

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GROWING WITH STYLE

Whatever the percentage of overall business, the contract design channel represents a segment that cannot be ignored by outdoor furnishings manufacturers or retailers. The opportunity to produce powerful collaborative results exists. This channel offers the potential to create occasions for pushing the outdoor envelope with style. "Everyone seems to understand that (outdoor décor) is much more than purchasing a table. It involves full design projects now," McKenzie said. "Dining and the accents using all the beautiful textiles now available are what have really set us apart."

"It is exciting to see residential, as well as commercial clients, really beginning to understand the benefit and unique quality that a refined outdoor space can add to their environment," said Stephanie Ferguson, Stephanie Ferguson Designs, Stuart, Fla. "Being a designer in southern Florida, I find that interior and exterior décor go hand in hand."

DÉCOR DEFINED

For the design professional, the flow from interior to exterior is a common theme and one that has been made easier with the sheer volume and innovation of exterior living products being developed. When further enhanced with a designer's touch, the result is a winning combination.

"As a designer I think (exterior décor) should be part of the conversation with every client and part of your marketing plan," McKenzie said. "More color and pattern for accents is what seems to really be trending now. The manufacturers seem to be pushing technology, especially in the synthetic materials for woven furniture and the fabric fibers to create even higher performing fabrics with complex weaves."

"We design our outdoor liv-



With the sourcing available from Decorating Den, Tonie VanderHultz is able to provide complete outdoor décor including furnishings and accessories.

ing spaces just like you would the inside of the home, creating individual outdoor rooms, each with its own functional purpose," Hughes said. "There is always a dining area, a casual seating area, a formal seating area as well as an outdoor kitchen with bar seating. In some cases, there is a sun deck with chaise lounges for sunbathing or just relaxing."

Hughes sees daybeds as the most popular outdoor element right now. "More and more, we see clients asking for full-size daybeds in which they can literally take a nap outdoors."

Outdoor curtains and draperies are also a popular design treatment being utilized in

contract installations.

"Clients are moving past merely having a lounging area in their outdoor space," Ferguson said. "I have found there is a growing interest in the dining element of outdoor living." Stephanie Ferguson Designs has developed a line of indoor/outdoor tablecloths, napkins and drapes to coordinate exterior looks for her clients. "This adds an element of sophistication to this environment, particularly when we have a lanai space to work with," Ferguson said. "For the future, I definitely see more sustainability in outdoor living and expanded product lines in response to greater outdoor living."

Comfortable seating to allow guests to linger at the outdoor dining table is seen as a key component in exterior designs for Tonie VanderHulst, Decorating Den, Redlands, Calif. "Deep comfortable seating is very important as more and more outdoor spaces have fire elements, some mixed with water elements. Then, of course, there are outdoor theaters for those where the budget allows."

Design features being introduced for Faith Fix's clients include double-sided fireplaces and trendy items such a pizza ovens, teppanyaki grills and beer boxes.

"The most popular elements of my exterior projects are deep comfortable seating and gorgeous dining groupings," Wichern said. "Using beautiful textiles and accessories makes the space really inviting and welcoming to owners and guests. The outdoor spaces need to be a haven. My clients love to retreat to their outdoor spaces to recharge and relax."

BUDGET BOOM

As designers are seeing the number and diversity of outdoor living products expanding, the same is being said about the budgets for the exterior projects.

"We find that, on a percentage basis, homeowners are allocating much more of their budget toward outdoor living," Hughes said. "You used to find that the average was about 10-15% of the home's budget was on the outdoor living space and/or swimming pool. Now it is up over 20%."

California designer VanderHulst also has seen overall growth in decorating budgets of which outdoor décor is a part. "Clients are ready to add this new living space to their budgets when considering their home interior design," VanderHulst said. "It is part of the package."

For Ferguson, the growth in

CHANNEL CHANGERS

Continued



Steve McKenzie, Atlanta designer, incorporates innovative textiles into outdoor spaces and views it as what sets his work apart.



Creating beautifully appointed outdoor spaces for clients in Florida, Stephanie Ferguson Designs incorporates her own textile designs including table top and curtains.

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budgets is reflective of product and living options. "Five years ago, people didn't have the choices for outdoor living that they have today," Ferguson said.

Fix finds that growth in exterior décor budgets is a function of the larger spaces being dedicated to outdoor living, while Wichern views the overall importance of the outdoor lifestyle as contributing to greater funds being allocated. "Exterior spaces are growing in importance and, therefore, budgets for my clients," Wichern said. "They are no longer just an add-on. They are an essential part of their living spaces."

STYLE

With the growth in the category and the number of

professionals utilizing outdoor living products in their contract design projects, reaching those individuals creates an opportunity for outdoor product manufacturers. Exterior design professionals provide insight into how they are keeping up on what's new.

"We are constantly looking at trade magazines, social media, trade shows and meeting with new reps when they are in the area," McKenzie said.

Traveling to trade shows has proven to produce results when looking for what is available as well as what is trending. "We travel to several shows around the country," Hughes said. "Dwell on Design, Casual Market in Chicago and the International Pool, Spa and Patio show are some of the main ones."

VanderHulst's association

with Decorating Den Interiors is a valuable source for products while Fix primarily buys direct from manufacturers. Both view the High Point Market as a show they regularly attend and a growing resource for outdoor living products.

The development of her own line of textiles has created a convenient resource for Ferguson's clients. "In recent years I have developed Cirque 612 indoor/outdoor fabrics and soft goods. In addition to my own collection, I attend numerous trade shows to source additional products," Ferguson said.

Due to the personalized size and nature of the independent designer's business, the use of trade and consumer publications is a convenient tool for product and trends information. "I do receive outdoor

publications," Ferguson said. "I find that they not only review important and trending products, but they also enable my clients to better understand a final vision for a project."

FUTURE OF FLAIR

Overall, the design channel offers a tremendous service to their customers and the outdoor industry as well. The future for this segment is viewed as full of potential.

"Even though the level of detail in outdoor living spaces has grown dramatically, we feel there is still much more to come," Hughes said. "Our mission is to educate our clients on not just the new trends and products, but more importantly, how to live a more outdoor lifestyle." 

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