



by **Nancy A. Ruhling**

Taking a Deep Dive on High End Elements



Pools are being decked out in everything from climbing walls and sculptural slides to viewing windows.

Whether it's a multi-colored illuminated mosaic, a stone grotto, or a fun feature like a slide or climbing wall, custom is the biggest trend in poolscape design. One-of-a-kind over-the-top features are design elements that add drama, says Ryan Hughes, founder and creative director of the Tampa, Florida-based design-build firm that bears his name.

“In each of our projects, we add what we consider a ‘wow’ factor,” he says. These “wow” factors include a custom grotto made of boulders that the client had collected during trips around the globe. In another project that features five bodies of water and several levels of outdoor living spaces, Ryan Hughes Design Build was called upon to create a water column that fuses engineering and eye appeal.



Photograph by Ray Corral/Mosaicist

The illuminated column of water originates from a cantilevered pavilion roof and plunges into the winding river below, an effect, Hughes says, that “makes a major aqua statement. This column pushes 550 gallons of water per minute as it falls to the river.”

To create the feel of a personalized resort for another poolscape, [Ryan Hughes Design Build](#) used reflective glass tile on the vanishing-edge spa and the large multi-directional pool and on a series of custom wall mosaics that incorporate moving water and dancing fire motifs.



Above and below, photographs by Carson Becker, Hanson PhotoGraphic, and Carson Becker

Bespoke features such as vanishing edge spas, sunken fire pits, intimate grottos, or gathering pavilions, waterfalls, intra-pool windows and sun-lounging shelves create endless possibilities for poolscape.

“A trend we are seeing is as outdoor spaces grow in size, there is more demand and need for pool and water elements to flow between multiple levels,” Hughes says. “No longer is a pool one flat rectangle – the design moves with the available space.”



MAKING THE POOL ARTISTIC, ONE TILE AT A TIME

Swimming pools, the stars of the outdoor living space, have become art objects in and of themselves, enhancing the house's architecture. Elaborate [glass-tile mosaics](#) at the bottom of the pool are transforming them to water art that can be seen and enjoyed even after the last cocktail has been served at the swim-up bar.

"People want a living body of water and something more than a pool to look at when they are inside their home," says Ray Corral, the founder/owner of Florida-based Mosaicist, an award-winning company that specializes in the design, manufacture, and installation of glass tiles in pools all over the globe.



Photograph by Jimi Smith

“This is really trending – the request for designs in the bottom of pools has increased 25 percent this year alone.” The idea is eye-catching and attractive, he adds, because “most people spend more time looking at their pool than they do being in it.” Typically, light-color designs, generally in hues of blue, are set against darker blue backgrounds to make them contrast and more visible.

“We are currently installing a very large pool art design in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, however, where this was reversed – it’s the design that’s darker, but this is not common,” he says. The most requested color, he adds, is Sea Marine, which he describes as “a dark blue that’s timeless and marine rich and has a lush one-of-a-kind, creamy color.”



Photograph by Jimi Smith

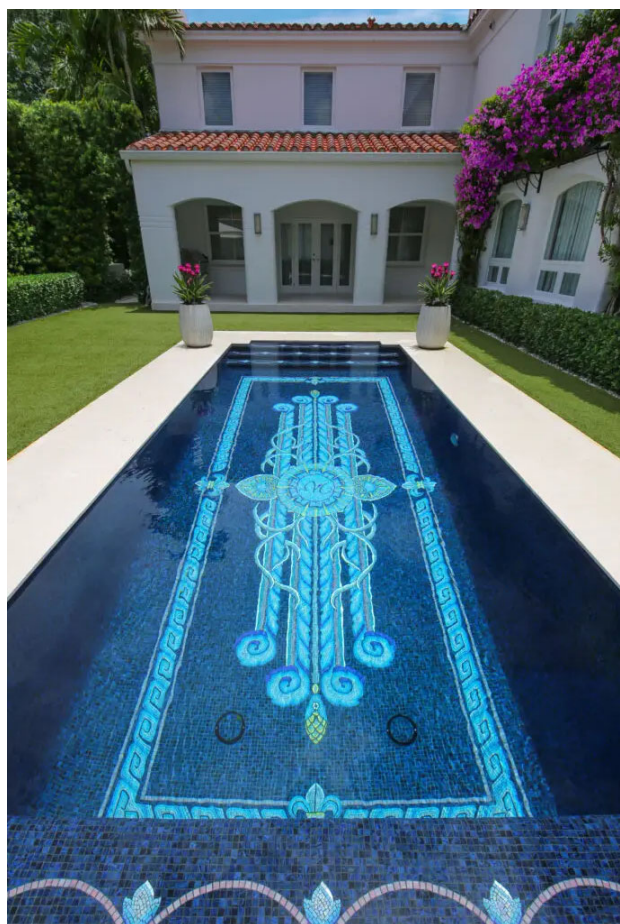
Mosaicist's bottom-of-the-pool murals are designed to fit the architecture of the house, lead times, and the budget. "The cost of the mosaics increases with the number of strikes or cuts made," Corral says, "but we have come up with a formula that's unique to pools and the pool industry that doesn't break the bank."

SLIDING INTO SCULPTURE

Like swimming pools, slides are becoming a key sculptural element in the backyard landscape. The UK-based [Splinterworks](#), which creates bespoke slides that are fun as well as beautiful, has taken them to a new level.

"Our clients want to have pieces that reflect their sense of style and personality," says Miles Hartwell, who founded the company in 2009 with Matt Withington. "They want unique products that elevate the everyday, that have an artistic sensibility, and that look good year-round."

Adds Withington, “They are looking for a timeless style that doesn’t age with trends; this comes with investing in pieces that have design integrity and a high quality of workmanship.”



Photos left to right, by Ray Corral/Mosaicist; by Poolside Adventures

To that end, Splinterworks’ slides, which are outfitted with proprietary water-cooling systems, are site-specific, creating striking sculptural shapes that can even appear to defy gravity. In a recent project, the company designed and installed a slide on a steep slope that dominated the site. “We used this to our advantage and harnessed the incline to create a superfun ride that twists and turns through a steep boulder garden, snaking down the garden into a magnificent indoor/outdoor pool,” Withington says.

Splinterworks’ new sister brand, Downtime, brings style at a lower price point. The slides have the same striking aesthetic as Splinterworks’ custom works, but they come in only one size (the buyer, though, does get to choose from a left or a right turn on the end). “We are excited about this because, for the first time, we have been able to create slides in beautiful colors that will reach more homes, spreading the fun but keeping pools stylish,” Hartwell says.



Photograph by Splinterworks

CLIMBING WALLS COMBINE ART AND ATHLETICS

Poolside climbing walls that combine aesthetics with athletics are another amenity that is gaining traction among all age groups of water lovers. Noting that climbing is now a featured sport in the Olympics, Russell Moy, CEO of the climbing wall manufacturer Poolside Adventures, says that there's been "explosive growth" in the sport in the last decade that has carried over to the pool.

The company's AquaClimb Luxe, its most custom product, is designed to incorporate a jumping platform and/or a zipline/rope swing.



Photograph by Ryan Hughes Design

When fitted with thermoformed clear or translucent blue panels that reflect and are enhanced by the pool water, the walls look like modern art. “Our residential clients want a structure and climbing profile unique to the pool setting,” he says.

“They want a wall that can be functional and challenging for multiple ages and varying skill levels and at the same time looks cool and not out of place with the pool’s architecture and landscaping.”



Photographs by Carson Becker, Hanson PhotoGraphic, and Carson Becker

For a client in Las Vegas, Poolside Adventures designed an AquaClimb Luxe climbing wall that complements a Romanesque pool house decorated with a mosaic mural; it has a zipline/rope swing attached for a 20-foot drop into the pool.

Poolside Adventures is working on incorporating LED lighting systems into its Luxe walls and is developing a climbing structure using a net system that is suspended six to 10 feet over the width of the pool to provide the ultimate water adventure.

aquaclimb.com, mosaicist.com, ryanhughesdesign.com, splinterworks.com

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