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Home builders creating designs with pets in mind

Home designers are making pet-friendly features a priority

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The demographics of pet ownership are beginning to shift toward pamper-happy millennials and younger owners

By Camilla McLaughlin

Not long ago, a collar, a leash, a bowl and possibly an outdoor kennel were what most people had as pet amenities.

Today, there are designer accessories, electronic feeders, automatic pet doors, special showers and tubs, and flat-screen TVs positioned at Fido's and Fifi's heights, not to mention the ultimate luxury: a room of their own.

Some builders are making pets a centerpiece of their home designs —and buyers are responding positively.

Last year, when Standard Pacific, a builder based in Irvine, Calif., offered pet rooms as an option at a new community in Brea, Calif., prospective buyers and their pets lined up for the grand opening.

Since then, Standard Pacific has expanded such rooms and other pet amenities to all 27 of its communities. Besides the in-home features, many developments offer dog parks, exercise stations, drinking fountains, wash areas and group picnic areas for four-legged companions.

Dogs and cats are no longer relegated to the back yard, barn or musty basement. In many of the nation's 79.8 million households with animals, they are considered family.

"Pets were a theme that kept coming up" in livability research with recent buyers, says Jeffrey Lake, Standard Pacific's national director of architecture. "In one home, I actually had four dogs that piled into my lap."

Says Rhyse Altman, an architect designer with Visbeen Architects in Grand Rapids, Mich.: “We are finding that pet owners are growing more aware of the benefits of designing homes with pets in mind.”

Altman adds: “What we are most concerned with is making it easier for their pets to eat, sleep, play, et cetera, on their own terms with as much independence as possible. The last thing a pet owner wants is to be tripping over food dishes, staring at a kennel in the middle of the living room, smelling the litter box or getting up in the middle of the night to let the dog out.”

Almost every metric - from the number of pets who go to work with their owners to the growing number of people who take their pets with them when they travel - illustrates how enmeshed pets have become in our lives. Americans’ spending on food, supplies and veterinary services reached an all-time high last year and experts are projecting that the number will surpass \$60 billion this year.

The demographics of pet ownership are beginning to shift toward millennials and younger owners who, according to a survey by the American Pet Products Association, tend to spend more and pamper their pets more than their parents and grandparents did.

Although baby boomers were the ones who really set the pet-pampering trend in motion, millennials are expected to dote even more on their pets, which means that in future years the term “pet amenities” might take on an entirely different meaning.

“Whatever people want for their pets, they are going to get,” says Rhona Sutter, a real estate agent in Naples, Florida, who founded the Pet Realty Network, which helps prospective buyers find pet-friendly properties. “Pets are something buyers definitely take into consideration now.”

For one couple outside Salt Lake City, pets were an important consideration in the design of an entire house.

Even though Blaine Raddon and Stacy Johnstun didn’t have a dog when they first thought about building, they said having a pet was a part of their life vision.

During the months-long process of designing the home with architect Russ Platt, they made accommodating a dog or two — and potentially a very large dog — a priority.

Early on, they decided on a breed — Great Dane — but their puppy, a blue male they named Blu, didn’t come on the scene until they were selecting their finishes, tile and flooring.

Located in Little Cottonwood Canyon in Sandy, Utah, the home is a striking contemporary that edges into the steep slope of the canyon’s hillside. Huge windows take in views of granite peaks to the north, the green of the surrounding forest and elevated views across the valley to the city in the distance.

A line of clerestory windows above the great room infuses even more natural light to both levels of the home. Telescoping doors made up of double-wide sheets of glass open the great room and the second-floor master bedroom to covered decks. Once the new landscaping matures, Raddon says, the areas surrounding the house will return to the existing natural terrain.

The property has an underground electronic fence for Blu and includes natural spots for him to play.

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Inside, few areas were conceived where Blu wasn't a consideration, beginning with the concrete floors in dark gray tones, a perfect match for his coat. "Great Danes really don't shed very much, but we picked these floors so any shedding would blend in," Raddon says.

Flooring is one concern for homeowners with pets. Many prefer hard surfaces or even some specialized floors marketed as pet friendly. Raddon also opted for hard surfaces on the second floor, selecting a gray and tan Daltile that mimics natural wood. It's one of those materials that must be touched to be sure it is tile.

Just outside the kitchen on the patio, an extensive butler's pantry is accessed through an electronic pet door. The pantry is hidden behind a brick wall that comprises the back of the kitchen and runs the length of the room.

Here, Raddon installed a feeding table where Blu eats and his food and accessories are stored. The electronic pet door opens in response to a magnetic key on the dog's collar, but otherwise remains closed, keeping critters out of the house.

In Utah, where wilderness and civilization often intersect, especially in canyon locations like this one, being able to control access is an important feature, says builder Adam Breen. Nationally, builders and architects say an electronic pet door is one of the most frequently requested amenities, especially because owners can program the hours when they will operate so a pet goes out only at certain times.

Kitchens and mudrooms also are places where consumers want to accommodate pets. For the past couple of years, pets have cropped up on the National Kitchen and Bath Association's annual state of the industry report.

Among members who designed kitchens in 2014, 5 percent said pet amenities - such as gates and special accommodations for feeding - were important to them. One of the biggest concerns for cat owners is litter boxes that can often be camouflaged with a cabinet-style design built under a countertop.

Designers such as Jennifer Gilmer, a kitchen and bath designer in Bethesda, Md., say they get the most requests for places to stash food and water bowls. One popular solution is a slide-out drawer in a cabinet that contains the dishes and is at the pet's height.

Kitchen designers say they also receive requests to hide a kennel or a litter box; an under-island solution is popular. Lake says large pantries are typical in Standard Pacific homes without pet rooms, allowing space to store bulk staples such as large bags of food.

Increasingly, too, owners are looking for alternatives to baby gates, which, until recently have been the go-to method for corralling the four-legged set. "We really like to integrate half-height pocket doors strategically throughout the house as a means to keep a pet away from certain activities without shutting it in a small room," Altman says.

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In Utah, Raddon's house includes dual offices on the main level that share a bathroom with a walk-in shower that Raddon uses as a dog-washing area. The location is just off the garage; another outdoor patio is also nearby.

A place to bathe dogs is another frequent request from pet owners; mud rooms are the setting where dog washes are frequently placed.

Some are elaborate, with seats for owners, steps for easy access if they are not walk-in, and what Lake calls the "all-important hook for a leash to contain those dogs that are wary of the water." Typically these washing areas are placed near an outside entry or a garage so a muddy dog can be hosed off before entering the house.

Although Raddon's house may not feature a pet space similar to those offered by Standard Pacific, a bedroom on the second floor has been outfitted to be a hangout for Blu.

With a bunk bed, the room is still versatile enough for younger guests, but the oversized bottom bunk is an ideal place for even a Great Dane to stretch out. It's positioned a little higher off the ground so the area underneath can accommodate a pet bed and becomes a cave-like hideaway.

It has been a few months since Raddon, Johnstun and Blu moved into their new home.

"The dog settled into the house quicker than we did. It took him less than a day to figure out the pet door and the fence," Raddon says. "Now, he feels like he is the king of the castle."