

# Designing Your Dream Home

*The possibilities are practically endless*

**D**esigning the home of your dreams begins with an idea in your mind of what you want, looking at a builder's plans and viewing models, and finally incorporating your modifications and selecting your upgrades. You are creating a home that is truly you, a place that is a pleasure to live in.

It is probably the single most important move and long-term investment in your life. Take your time in making the multitude of decisions that lie ahead, and find a quality, reliable, and knowledgeable new home builder who will work closely with you from start to finish.

Become an information collector. Request the builder's information packages. You should get floor plans and details on what items are basic and what are upgrades. Get a detailed specification sheet listing construction, finishing, electrical and plumbing systems materials. Investigate the manufacturers and their warranties. If you are interested in purchasing earth-friendly products, now is the time to inquire.

One of the advantages to building your own home may be flexibility in location and choice of the lot. Take a bird's eye view and look at the area around the lot. Ensure there is enough privacy, that the sun will rise on the sides you prefer, that the location is not too close to a major road and is not too noisy, and that the lot shape and size is suitable for your uses and landscaping.

Take a tour through a model you are interested in and take note of the quality, care, and finishing touches. Ask what is standard and what is an upgrade. Imagine living there, going through your everyday routines and recreation. Will it suite your life now, and will it accommodate your planned future? Pre-planning can save thousands later on. Move through the house and consider traffic flow, which

should be smooth and unobstructed from room to room. If you can, test the sound insulation between floors and walls. Are the windows a comfortable size and height?

Try the light switches, door handles, water taps and flooring, especially in high-traffic areas like mudrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens.

Consider the room sizes and layout and your current furniture and appliances. It is best to bring measurements and a measuring tape to compare how things will fit and flow through doors and around corners. Sometimes builders will be able to move certain walls or columns in a model to better suit your needs.

Following the popular open concept style, new homes often include what's a "Great Room" —a central area which gives you an open view from the front entrance across the house to the back of the home. It imparts a sense of spaciousness and connection.

You have the opportunity to create the atmosphere you desire for each room. Design techniques, like bulkheads, columns, partial walls, lighting effects, and types of flooring treatments can be combined to create different effects. You can consult your builder for recommendations, or speak with a designer.

Modern new homes are built to maximize natural light, but you may opt to add or enlarge a window. Think about your storage needs and whether you might like to enhance the storage spaces in a model. You could even rough-in plumbing, or other systems in the basement or attic if there's a probable future need.

Along the same thinking, consider pre-wiring your new home for electrical, cable, telephone, intercom, house automation, and fire or security systems even if you don't plan on using them immediately. It is far more economical and convenient to do it during construction than later. As well, they can be covered under your home warranty. We'll look at this in more detail later.

## Features and Finishes

Selecting the features and finishing touches you want are among the most exciting choices you get to make. Now you get to personalize your house, and make it a home.

New homes have many wonderful standard features that are included in the basic price and make for great value, and you may even have some choice within those standards such as floor colour and design or cabinetry styles. However, a vast array of choices comes from optional upgrades.

Some upgrades can be quite large such as an additional room, fireplace, luxury bathroom, wine cellar, etc. but the builder will normally credit you the value of the standard item, so you only pay the difference. There are numerous smaller upgrades that can make a big difference in your quality of life, such as thicker carpeting, higher quality counter-tops, bathtub grab-bars—the list is endless!

It can be overwhelming, but the best place to start is with the basics that come with your house. Then make your “wish-list” of upgrades and prioritize what is most important to you, individually adding them to the purchase price. You may find that you can’t have it all at once and need to make trade-offs, or plan for later.

Consider that you will probably be living with your choices for some time, so you may want to keep the largest expenses neutral in colour. Colour can be added with other, less expensive, easier to change decorative items. Also remember that your colour choices must work with your furnishings and other family member use, like children.

## Lighting

Lighting affects the whole look and feel of your home. You want it to be attractive as well as functional. Lighting not only affects moods, but can also function to give greater convenience, safety, and security.

Once again, learn what your standard lighting package is, and what upgrades are available, at what additional cost. Your builder can help, or refer you to a decor centre or an interior decorator.

Do your research and collect more information and brochures. When working with experts, bring your home’s plans, indicating the outlets, so you will know what you have to work with.

Colours and textures reflect and absorb light differently, so carry samples of your interior finishings like carpeting, paint colours, counters, cupboard doors, etc. That will help ensure you make the right lighting choices. It might be a good idea to get a large, sturdy bag to carry your research, samples, and plans in.

Address each room and hallway/stair one-by-one. Note each one’s features, purpose, and the atmosphere you want to create there, and consider the following options:

- Convenience—dimmers, hand-held controls, multiple switches, timers.
- Automation—door-activated closet lighting, built-in night lights. Both single light automation and whole-house systems are available.
- Accents—around cupboards, shelves, bookcases, home exterior or landscaping
- Safety—motion sensors
- Energy efficiency—timers, sensors, energy efficient bulbs such as halogen

Always refer back and check with your builder to ensure your choices are within budget and the construction schedule.

There’s never been a wider selection of style, function, and efficient lighting available to new home builders, who have a fantastic opportunity to customize their home.

## Landscaping

Like everything else about your home, you have an uncommon opportunity to customize your landscaping from the very start. Landscaping adds extra appeal and comfort to your home, extending its beautiful presence and value beyond the square footage. Well designed surroundings add natural space for personal relaxation or entertaining, and appeal to your home.

Professional builders will work with your landscaping plans from the beginning, and can refer you to landscape experts you can work with to create those plans.

Whoever does your landscaping, there are many things to consider. Working from scratch you get to entertain all sorts of uses for your land. Will you want a pond, a pool, easy-care plants, wildflower garden, play structure, sitting area, waterfall, rock garden, or vegetable garden?

Once again, imagining your landscaping in all seasons and making a prioritized wish-list will help narrow-down the options and avoid mistakes. Do consider your natural surroundings several years down the road, as landscaping is a slow-growing work of art that may need a long-term, multi-phase plan.

You will need to discuss things like drainage, landfill, foundation height, land levels, drainage patterns (and possibly erosion), eavestrough location, and lighting power access with your builder. If you want to build a deck, where will the access be, and what will the view be like from inside? Some people even run a gas line outside for a barbecue. It's thinking ahead about "little" things like this that make your home a convenient, enjoyable place to live.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty we find another endless list of choices when you begin to think about the lawn, plant species and their growing habits, seasonally growing colourful flowers, watering, mulching, mowing, shading, and patio stones, etc. From the very beginning you can plan to create a low-maintenance, lost-cost, yet lovely garden. Speak to a gardening specialist.

## Pre-wiring

Today's modern lifestyle demands a modern home. Yet another major new construction advantage, new homes are beginning to capitalize on fast-advancing communications technology.

They can be pre-wired for high-speed internet, digital television, direct broadcast satellite service, home computer networks or office, security systems, environmental and energy management systems, and home entertainment centres.

Some pre-wiring is often standard, like multiple cable TV and telephone outlets, but why stop there? Pre-wiring can be customized to suit your needs now and later. The "connected" home involves a central hub, where incoming telecommunications services are distributed throughout the home. Connect every room—this will be especially handy if you decide to change what your rooms are used for as your life circumstances change.

Computing—Unless you plan to go wireless, a network and high-speed internet connections throughout the house will come in handy.

Entertainment—Think about speakers, cable, and outlets for an entertainment centre, and perhaps the ability to re-direct output to different television screens in different rooms. Satellite cabling from the roof throughout the house can be accommodated. Stereo wiring in every room (with individual speaker power switches) is on many people's wish list.

Security—Think about wiring the doors and windows for an alarm system, even if you don't plan to use it until later on. Also, video surveillance systems can be used at the front door or in the baby's room.

Now's your chance to make these choices that will add to your comfort, security, and pleasure—and possibly you're home's future resale attractiveness and value.

## Community

Beyond the physical house, community helps make it a home. Look closely at the surrounding community where you are thinking about building. Select a community that best suits your stage and interested in life Are you planning on raising a young family, enjoying and active adult outdoor life or looking forward to enjoying a quiet retirement? Which community best suits you?

Check the size, ages, styles, and price ranges of local homes. You may even be able to get a profile of the type of people who have bought in the area. Explore the parks, community centres and services, transportation services, sidewalks, bicycle paths, shops, and what might be with walking distance. Inquire into any community fees and regulations regarding building. Ask around about what the adjoining land has been zoned for, and what future development plans for them lie ahead. Ask to see a plan for the community.

Current residents might be open to responding to whatever questions you have.