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A woman's place

By *JEFF WILFORD, Assistant City Editor*

CEDAR FALLS --- More than window accents and freshly cut flowers are needed to add a woman's touch to a home these days. It also requires things like drop zones, bathroom cabinets for hair dryers and kitchen cabinets for small appliances.

In short, it takes a home designed from the start with the woman in mind.

That's according to Woman-Centric Matters, a home design service offered by Design Basics, which is based in Omaha.

"None of these things are the first time it's ever been done," said Denny Lenth, owner of Denny Lenth Construction and recently licensed as a Woman-Centric Matters home builder. "But it's all just designed to give the family home more of a woman's touch than it's had in the past."



Denny Lenth stands with Jeff Rhea in a living room with a high-vaulted ceiling in a home Denny Lenth Construction is building in Cedar Falls. Lenth and Rhea have been working together on designing homes that are tailored to appeal to women. Rhea is a landscape expert from Turf and Landscape.

SCOTT MUSSELL/Courier Staff Photographer

Such a service is needed, said Paul Foresman, director of business development for Design Basics.

A survey by the National Association of Home Builders shows that women make --- or have the most influence in making --- 91 percent of home-purchasing decisions.

"Most home builders are guys. Bottom line," Foresman said. "In fact, most architects and engineers are guys.

"Most of the time, us guys, we simply aren't as aware of what she wants in a home, how she lives in a home, as we should be," he added.

Women make up about 2 percent of construction management nationwide, said Carmel

Nayman, an assistant staff vice president who oversees the association's Women's Council.

Surveys done by Woman-Centric Matters show a lot of houses just don't measure up, Foresman said.

"When we come home at the end of the day, research suggests, about the time we're entering the home, we're mentally beginning to relax --- us guys," Foresman said. "The same research has shown that as she enters the home, her blood pressure rises by about three points ... as she enters her second job."

Woman-Centric's solution to that problem is the drop zone, also called a distress zone.

Women-friendly touches

It's a small room, a place between the garage entrance and the rest of the house (the door most often used by family to enter the home), where women (and guys) can drop the mail, plug in the cell phones, stow umbrellas and kids can stow backpacks. In other words, it's a drop point for things in your hand that would otherwise become clutter on the kitchen counter, Foresman said.

"So this drop zone entrance liberates her kitchen," Foresman said.

Lenth went to Omaha for training in the design principals. He took with him a blueprint for a Northeast Iowa Home Builders Parade of Homes house he is building in Cedar Falls. He said consultants at Woman-Centric Matters went over it and made three significant changes:

--- They added a drop zone, or rear foyer, between the garage and kitchen.

--- They added a flat-screen TV to the master bath.

--- They redesigned the kitchen to make it more open.

"At this particular Parade home that I'm doing this year, you can stand at the kitchen and look all the way to the fireplace in the wall, and that's a really nice touch," Lenth said.

Other elements also increase a home's appeal to women, Foresman said.

Flexible space allows rooms to change purpose as needs change --- a play room becomes a guest room, or a walk-in closet, when kids are grown with the addition or deletion of a door. Smart, well-designed storage where women need it most --- large closets with bins and cubbies, large kitchen pantries, a breakfast drawer to stow the still plugged-in toaster out of sight.

"Where does the kitchen wastebasket go? This is a favorite pet peeve of mine," Foresman said. "There's very little room for a good-sized waste basket" in most waste basket cabinets. But cabinet manufacturers offer a feature with a pullout wastebasket.

"But most of the time, we don't think about how the home lives," Foresman said. "In order to keep homes competitively priced, that's not an included feature. But I've never met a woman

who, when aware of the feature, wasn't willing to spend a few dollars more" to have it included.

Anticipating needs

Spec homes --- houses built without a specific buyer --- are a tricky thing for home builders to splurge on. Because they're betting that a buyer will come once it is built, and speculating what the home might fetch on the open market, builders have to keep their costs down in order to still make a profit. As a result, they often don't build in the smaller features that appeal to women, Foresman said.

For example, women tend to want quieter appliances, Foresman said. A one-horsepower garbage disposal is nearly twice as quiet as a half-horsepower model, but more expensive. Consequently, a lot of spec homes are built with the less expensive, but noisier, garbage disposal, he said.

While open floor plans that largely eliminate the physical boundaries between kitchen, living and family areas have been popular among home builders and women, area home builders have started to catch on to the bigger picture of appealing to women.

One place this is apparent is in some of the spec homes contractors build, said Stacy Donley, a home designer for Waterloo Lumber.

"I think if they're (home builders) going to splurge, they're going to splurge on those features that women are looking for," Donley said.

"It's starting to be more popular, yeah," Donley said about women-oriented home features. "It's all about convenience -- whatever makes her life easier," Donley said. "You used to never see laundry rooms on the main floor."

Donley helps couples design their home, but "a lot of times, I don't even meet the husband," she said.

She said contractors are getting more of the woman's perspective on design as well.

"Contractors are realizing they need to speak to the woman," Donley said. "They've got to be aware of what she wants, and sometimes mediate between what he wants and she wants and make them both happy.

"That's why they have a lot of media rooms in the basement, so guys can go down and have their big TV and not have it part of the central living space."

Taking out the guesswork

Gloria Mueller, co-owner of Re/Max Home Group real estate firm, agreed that contractors are tuning in more to what women want in a home.

Women like the functionality of an open design, which eliminates the physical boundaries between the kitchen and family area and allows them to stay connected to the family even

while preparing meals, Mueller said. But they're also looking for more.

"I would say probably in the last four or five years, our builders have been paying more attention to what it is the woman likes. One item that comes into play, and I don't know that every builder thinks about it, is no woman likes to walk in the front door and be able to see her kitchen," Mueller said. "I can't tell you how many times I have had a woman tell me, 'Don't show me a house where I can see the kitchen from the front door.'"

Mueller said features like a sprinkler system and central vacuum are popular with women. The central vacuum --- a built-in vacuum cleaner with wall receptacles around the house to attach a vacuum hose --- are almost commonplace in new homes.

"Women are so busy these days, if they're working outside of the home, they're doing double duty," Mueller said. "The central vac and the sprinkler system are a help for her, time-wise especially."

While Woman-Centric Matters offers home designs that are crafted specifically for female appeal, it also trains its licensed home builders, like Lenth, to consult with women about what features are available to install before they spend money on upgrades.

Donley said many of the women she works with on designs are very savvy about what features are available for inclusion in their homes.

"I think a lot of the home channels ... have got people aware of what there is out there," Donley said. "Sometimes they will come in with things I've never heard of, that they've seen on TV or read in a magazine or seen in somebody else's house."

Things like dishwasher drawers --- mini dishwashers, contained in a drawer in a cabinet, to supplement the capacity of the regular dishwasher.

"I know my wife, on the last house we built, she did a lot of the kitchen layout," said Jim Hoffman, owner of Jim Hoffman Construction. One feature she included: self-closing drawers. "That was a big thing with her, and that surprised me. I didn't even know about them."

Hoffman said the need to appeal to women in home design and construction is not a revelation to home builders.

"I think everybody locally tries to strive for that feature," Hoffman said.

"Bottom line, it's just good design," Foresman said. "We find that men appreciate the things that we're doing in Woman-Centric homes as much as women do."

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