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Too Customized to Sell?

Designing a home with personal touches will make it your own — but it could also make it harder to find buyers when you decide to move on.

By Caroline Biggs

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Decorating is always a very personal thing. Family photos, custom tile, a favorite chair in a quirky pattern — these are the kind of things that can turn an empty shell into a home. But is it possible to take it too far?

Could, say, an all-gold master bathroom, a saltwater pool inside a townhouse or a rock-climbing wall in a finished basement cost more than the price of the renovation? As special as these places may be, appraisers and brokers say that excessive customization can affect the price of a property when it is time to sell — and, perhaps more important, limit the pool of potential buyers.

“One of the biggest misunderstandings about property value is that the amenities you choose to add will translate to value,” said Jonathan Miller, president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel. Because taste can be so specific, he said, “unless you find the perfect buyer, you’re probably going to have to factor in a discount for the price to rip it out and renovate.”

Simply put: That rock-climbing wall may have cost \$15,000 to build, but you shouldn’t assume that you can automatically tack that sum onto the asking price when you decide to sell, because not everyone will want a custom feature like that.

When Jessica Schur began designing her dream home, a brand-new, three-story modern farmhouse in Greenwich, Conn., in 2017, creating an indoor playroom for her children, Austin, 7, and Julia, 3, was a priority.

“Connecticut’s cold winters mean the kids will be stuck inside at least three months of every year,” Ms. Schur said. “It was important to me to give them a space where they could play, climb, jump and swing.”

With the help of Kimberly Handler, an interior designer, Ms. Schur hired Karri Bowen-Poole, a grade-school-teacher-turned-designer who founded a company called Smart Playrooms, to turn her 1,500-square-foot basement into an all-seasons playroom.

In addition to a 20-foot-wide rock-climbing wall, monkey bars and a mini-basketball court, the new playroom has an arts-and-crafts area with a wall-mounted chalkboard, a media lounge with hanging-pod swing chairs and an under-the-stairs reading nook with string lights and a beanbag

chair. There is also a hanging trapeze, as well as a built-in ladder, a climbing rope, swings and plenty of brightly colored floor mats for worry-free frolicking.



Inside his six-story townhouse in Hell's Kitchen, Matt Hansen transformed the garden level into an indoor gastro pub, complete with a full-service bar and built-in seating booth. The Corcoran Group

And while the room took six weeks and \$25,000 to complete, the major structural changes were surprisingly few. To secure the hanging trapeze and swings, four ceiling supports with hooks were attached to the ceiling so that hanging equipment could be switched out easily. And the four-by-four-foot panels used to construct the 12-foot-tall rock-climbing wall were simply mounted to a large piece of plywood spanning the wall for added support.

“Nothing is irreversible: The panels come off and the bars come down,” Ms. Schur said.

“Besides,” she added, “this is our family’s dream home. We’re not really concerned with resale value.”

Matt Hansen felt the same way about his six-story townhouse in Hell’s Kitchen. Mr. Hansen bought the 7,000-square-foot home in 2011, when he was newly single after a divorce, and spent the next four and a half years renovating it for himself and his three sons, who come to visit.

“I was going out a lot in the city,” he said. “I wanted to have a space at home to entertain, too.”

Jessica Schur enlisted the help of Smart Playrooms to turn her Greenwich, Conn., basement into an indoor recreation area for her two young children. Jane Beiles

For Mr. Hansen, that meant transforming the entire garden level of the townhouse into a customized recreation room for friends and family.

With the help of William Suk, of Suk Design Group, Mr. Hansen created an indoor gastro pub, complete with a full-service bar (with a pair of keg-friendly refrigerators with bar taps, soda guns and a commercial-grade ice machine), a \$4,000 home theater with a Hollywood-standard high-definition projector and a 2,000-square-foot outdoor area with seating and a state-of-the-art sound system.

Modeled after a British pub, the 1,250-square-foot room, which cost \$200,000 to create, also has plenty of games, including a pool table, foosball table, a retro “Simpsons”-themed pinball machine and an old-school Arcade Legends machine with more than 300 vintage arcade games.

There is a huge built-in lounge booth for playing cards or Parcheesi, four big-screen televisions with separate cable boxes (for watching four sporting events at once) and specially commissioned artwork by James Stanley, with comic-book logos and other 1970s-inspired themes.

Graham Hill customized his 350-square-foot SoHo apartment with multifunctional furnishings. Christopher Testani

The space can pivot from living room, to bedroom, to dining room in a matter of seconds.
Christopher Testani

“I love the whole floor because there’s something for everyone,” Mr. Hansen said. “What started as a personal room to retreat to evolved into more of a community gathering space for people of all ages.”

Now that his sons are college age, Mr. Hansen has decided to sell the townhouse, and has listed it for \$11.95 million — with the option of having all the bells and whistles in the rec room included — and is hoping that another family (or bachelor) will appreciate his concept of indoor entertaining.

“The entertainment floor is a huge selling point for the house,” said Scott B. Stewart of Corcoran, Mr. Hansen’s real estate agent. “Typically, properties of this size are designed solely for families, so to have a full floor dedicated to entertaining guests young and old is unique to the market.”

Maybe. But sometimes a highly personalized space can make finding the right buyer a lot harder.

At 23 Cornelia Street, in Greenwich Village, David Aldea spent more than five years renovating his three-floor townhouse. Along with a private garage and roof deck, Mr. Aldea worked with Galia Solomonoff, an architect, to turn the subterranean level of the townhouse into an indoor spa with a sauna, a gym and a saltwater swimming pool.

In Greenwich Village, David Aldea converted the subterranean level of his townhouse into an indoor spa with a saltwater pool. The Corcoran Group

At 30 feet long, 15 feet wide and five and a half feet deep, the pool required multiple city permits and the excavation of two stories below the existing basement level to complete. The back garden was also excavated to allow natural light into the space. The permit process was further complicated when the neighborhood received landmark designation mid-renovation.

The end result, however, is impressive. Surrounded by basalt stone floors, the pool area has double-height ceilings, a crystal chandelier, a wet bar, a lounge and a 35-foot-tall gallery space. Mr. Aldea even installed a dumbwaiter next to the pool to send food and drinks from the second-floor kitchen straight to the underground area.

“I find large townhouses somewhat boring,” he said. “There should be a wow factor on every floor.”

Mr. Aldea bought the house for \$5.3 million in 2005 and spent roughly \$5 million on the renovation. He has listed it with the Deborah Grubman team at Corcoran for \$14.9 million, or for \$42,500 a month as a rental, he said, because he is “eager to build another one, and the design-and-build process is my passion.”

Finding the right buyer for the customized townhouse, which has been on the market since April 2017, has proved tricky. But Taylor Swift rented it last year, and Mr. Aldea has no qualms about holding out for an exceptional buyer who will understand his vision.

“I always design homes for my own taste,” he said. “If you design something to sell, you won’t attract special buyers. I knew the pool was unusual for the neighborhood, and the right person will see the uniqueness.”

Mr. Hansen's 1,250-square-foot rec room is furnished with a pinball machine, a pool table and a home theater with a Hollywood-standard high-definition projector.

The Corcoran Group

At 69 Wooster Street, in SoHo, the master bathroom may be one of the most extravagant in Manhattan. Sam Jaradeh, the owner, was inspired by Old World Turkish baths when he spent nearly \$140,000 on an all-gold bathroom with made-to-order Italian gold-glass mosaic tile on the walls and floor, a mirrored ceiling to reflect the tile (creating the illusion that the ceiling is gold) and a custom-made free-standing brass tub from Catchpole & Rye with a gold-plated interior.

There is also a custom-made gold-leafed chair, a vanity with gold-brass hardware, an antique crystal chandelier and a flashy piece of artwork by the British artist Ryan Callanan, appropriately titled "Big Money."

In July, when Mr. Jaradeh listed the 6,000-square-foot loft for \$12 million with Steve Gold, a Corcoran agent, he was aware that finding a buyer for an apartment so taste-specific would not be easy. "It's a very eclectic and aesthetic-specific space. If you're a minimalist-minded person, this isn't the place for you," he said.

"Right now, the market is saturated with new developments, and this stands out as something truly unique," Mr. Gold said. "It's not going to be for everyone, but the right buyer will embrace it for the one-of-a-kind place it is."

As Mr. Miller, the appraiser, pointed out, if you think of the buyer pool for an apartment as a pie, "to enhance market value you need to appeal to the largest piece of the pie."

And "not everyone wants a gold-plated toilet," he added. "There are people that do, but they're few and far between."

Still, highly customized rooms like these have been making an appearance in new developments. At 11 Beach, a luxury condominium in TriBeCa, full-floor "private spa sanctuaries" have been installed in three of the single-family townhouse residences, each one with its own 50-foot stainless-steel indoor pool, sauna and steam shower.

"These kinds of in-home additions stand out to buyers because they're life-changing," said Holly Parker, an agent with Douglas Elliman who is handling sales for 11 Beach. "To be able to exercise, relax and entertain inside your home will truly change the way you live."

And sometimes customized spaces can actually simplify a home.

At 150 Sullivan Street, in SoHo, Graham Hill bought a 350-square-foot apartment in 2010 for \$280,000, a few floors above a slightly larger studio he already owned. Mr. Hill, the founder of LifeEdited, a lifestyle and design company that specializes in pared-down, eco-friendly living, was determined to transform the tiny apartments into multipurpose spaces that reflected a “less but better” philosophy.

After crowdsourcing a design competition on his website for the first apartment, Mr. Hill spent \$365,000 turning the 420-square-foot space into what he called LE1, a multifunctional apartment that can accommodate two guests and seat up to 12 for dinner.

In 2013, once that renovation was finished, he began remodeling the smaller apartment. Three years and \$275,000 later, LE2 was complete. Like its predecessor, it is a convertible micro-apartment that can change its layout to accommodate a bedroom, a guest room, a home office and a dining room.

In the living room, a modern Murphy bed folds down over the sofa to create a master bedroom, complete with a foldout mini-nightstand. An adjustable coffee table lifts and expands into a full-blown dining table that can comfortably seat up to 10. And thanks to a Hufcor accordion door, Mr. Hill was able to turn a small nook near the living room into a multifunctional room that can pivot from a home office with a fold-down desk to a guest room to a minibar.

All of the technology in the apartment, from the blinds to the projector and sound system, can be controlled by a smartphone app. And Mr. Hill furnished the space primarily with ready-made pieces from Resource Furniture, including the sofa-wall bed, the coffee-slash-dining table and the fold-down desk in the office alcove.

Mr. Hill said he found LE2 so comfortable that he has lived there — at one point with a girlfriend and two small dogs — on and off since its completion in 2016.

“There’s something wonderful about having a small space with only the stuff you need and really love,” he said. “It makes for a more financially stable living situation and, in turn, a better quality of life.”

LE2 is now on the market for \$750,000, fully furnished. And despite its ultra-customized design, Jerrie Butler, a Corcoran agent, said the apartment has been a hit with prospective buyers, especially those looking to streamline their lives.

Of course, as Mr. Miller observed, “the danger of improving a small space by adding significant functionality to it is that you may price out the buyer pool for studios.” (The median sales price for a co-op studio in SoHo in 2017 was \$557,000, with an average of 584 square feet, according to a report Mr. Miller prepared for Douglas Elliman.)

As far as Mr. Butler is concerned, though, you get what you pay for. “Every square inch of the apartment is utilized,” he said. “It’s modern but timeless — space-savvy never goes out of style in New York.”

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