Exterior renovations that can improve home value

Renovating a home to improve its value can be a smart investment. Interior improvements, such as updating kitchens and baths, offer good return on investment, but there are plenty of exterior renovations that can add value to a home and give it that coveted “wow” factor.

Landscaping
Abundant and well-planned landscaping can instantly boost curb appeal. According to the landscaping company Lawn Starter, 71 percent of prospective home buyers say a home’s curb appeal is an important factor in their buying decisions. As buyers use the internet to look for their dream homes, there’s no denying a beautifully landscaped, nicely photographed property can entice buyers to click and read more about a house.

Address insects and minor repairs
Improving home value may come down to fixing areas of the home that can negatively affect its appeal to buyers. Hire an inspector to look at key components of the house and recommend what needs to be fixed. This way it is discovered before home buyers come in and do their own inspections. Termite infestations, deteriorating roofs and hidden water leaks are some things that might need fixing.

Improve the entryway
The front door is the focal point of a home’s exterior. Invest in a new door or paint it a striking color to add appeal. Remodeling magazine’s “Cost vs. Value Report 2019” indicates changing an entry door to a steel replacement can offer 74.9 percent ROI. Such a door provides visual appeal and added security — things buyers look for. In addition to the front door, make sure that the entryway has a level walkway, steps that are in good repair, accents that are free from rust or tarnish, and decorative plants.

Outdoor lighting
Outdoor lighting can add to the ambiance of a property and serve as a security feature. Utilize different lights, such as a bright light by the entry, uplighting in trees and shrubs for drama, a light-lined path to the door to improve visibility, and motion-detection lights to improve the security of the property.

Repaint (or reside) the exterior
A fresh coat of paint or new (or cleaned) siding can instantly give homes a facelift. Neutral, warm and inviting colors tend to have the widest appeal. Adding manufactured stone veneer to the home can offer a 94.9 percent ROI, says Remodeling. And after doing the front door and siding, investing in a garage door replacement offers the highest ROI of all exterior projects listed on the “Cost vs. Value Report 2019.” This improvement returns 97.5 percent when selling.

Knowing which improvements add value to a home can help homeowners tailor their efforts to those that are most financially beneficial.
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What are the differences between real estate agents and brokers?

Real estate transactions often involve significant amounts of money. As a result, it’s common for both buyers and sellers to enlist the services of a host of professionals with real estate experience.

Both buyers and sellers may work with real estate agents and/or real estate brokers en route to buying or selling their homes. Agents and brokers are not one and the same, and there are some important distinctions between the two.

**Real estate agent**

According to Realtor.com, real estate agents are professionally licensed individuals who can help both buyers and sellers. Agents also may help property owners rent their homes. The amount of training real estate agents need to earn their licenses varies by state. Once individuals finish their required training, they must take a written exam that tests their knowledge of federal real estate laws and general principles as well as the laws specific to the state in which they want to become licensed. Only after passing this exam do individuals become recognized real estate agents. Investopedia notes that achieving agent status is the starting point for most real estate professionals.

**Real estate broker**

Real estate brokers are those professionals who have continued their education past the agent level and obtained a broker’s license. Each state has its own requirements in regard to becoming a licensed broker, but education and examinations are necessary regardless of where a person lives.

Realtor.com notes that the extra coursework to earn a broker’s license focuses on various topics, including ethics, contracts, taxes, and insurance. Agents may learn about these topics as well, but coursework for prospective brokers goes into more depth than it does at the agent level.

Brokers also will study and learn about legal issues in regard to real estate. The legal issues brokers may learn about include brokerage operations, real estate investments, construction, and property management. Requirements vary, but Realtor.com notes that brokers often must work as licensed real estate agents for no less than three years before they can earn their broker’s license.

There is more than one type of real estate broker. Principal/designated brokers oversee all agents at a given firm and ensure the agents act in compliance with all real estate laws. Managing brokers tend to focus on the hiring and training of agents. Associate brokers have their broker’s license but work directly under a managing broker.

Real estate agents and brokers can help buyers, sellers and investors successfully navigate real estate transactions, and each can serve their clients in different ways.
How to build a more energy-efficient home this summer

(MS) — With weather forecasts calling for a warmer than normal summer and social distancing encouraging us to spend more time at home, we could all benefit from boosting our home's energy efficiency to save on energy bills. Here are some big and small changes that could help:

**Start with a solid foundation.** If you're adding an extension to your home, a pool to your backyard or even planning a custom-built dream home, choose sustainable materials that promote energy conservation. Instead of traditional wood-framing, consider insulated concrete forms from Nudura. The eco-friendly alternative features thermal mass walls that can reduce heating and cooling costs by up to 60 percent a year.

**Work on your windows.** Did you know that about 15 to 20 percent of your home's surface is windows? This means any issues with them can have a major impact on your energy consumption. Take time to caulk any gaps or air leaks, and consider upgrading to energy-efficient windows. Double-paned windows boost your insulation and help ensure your cooled, air conditioned air doesn't escape.

**Switch to outdoor energy sources.** Take advantage of the gorgeous weather to spend more time outside. Instead of cooking meals in your energy-intensive oven that also heats up your home, break out the barbecue and enjoy dinner al fresco. You can also ease up on the clothes dryer by setting up a line and some pins in the backyard and use the wind and sun for drying power.

**Install a smart weather station.** Technology can help you make sure you're consuming energy wisely. A smart thermostat is a great idea, but a smart weather station can work with it and other devices to go a step beyond, programming them around current and predicted weather patterns. For example, it can ensure your scheduled sprinkler won't go off in the middle of a downpour.

**Be mindful of your refrigerator.** If you aren't careful, a lot of energy can be used by your fridge. First, make sure the one in your kitchen (and basement) is a newer model, as older ones can cost hundreds more a year to power. Then, clear it out so the shelves and drawers aren't overcrowded, which makes the fridge work harder to pump cool air throughout. Finally, if you let leftovers cool on the counter before putting them inside, your fridge will use less energy.

Find more information at nudura.com.
How home design trends are evolving for social distancing

(MS) — COVID-19 has brought changes to everything, and home design is no exception. Experts are expecting to see lasting impacts on everything from the materials we use to the rooms we prioritize. Check out these and other noteworthy trends:

**Houses over apartments:** Many people who live in condos or apartments do so to be closer to the action — work, entertainment and shops — and never planned on spending much time at home. But the pandemic has changed that, and more people are going to want a home that offers plenty of room and outdoor space in case they need to self-isolate again.

**Self-sufficiency:** A hard lesson we've learned is that things and services we thought we could count on aren't necessarily a sure thing, so items that increase self-reliance will become very popular. Expect to see more homes with sources of energy like solar panels, sources of heat like fireplaces and stoves, and even urban and indoor gardens that allow you to grow your own produce.

**Outdoor living:** Between playgrounds closing and parks becoming overcrowded, many of us are turning to our balconies, patios and backyards for fresh air and nature. This means we're going to be investing more in our outdoor spaces, with functional kitchens, soothing water features, cozy firepits, and high-quality outdoor furniture to create a much-needed escape.

**Healthier spaces:** Thanks to spending more time indoors and re-prioritizing our health, we'll turn to design to help ensure our homes are safe and healthy for our families. We'll see a rise in products like water filtration systems as well as materials that improve indoor air quality. For new homes and additions, alternatives to wood-framing like insulated concrete forms from Nudura, which offer improved ventilation for healthier indoor air quality and an environment that's less susceptible to mold, will be key.

**Home office space:** Business experts are suggesting many companies will see that working from home is not only possible but offers tangible benefits, like saving money on office space rent. With working from home on the rise, creating a home office space that inspires productivity will be a major project many of us tackle.

**Custom and quality:** With the hit to the economy, people are going to be buying less, but what they do buy will be better quality, while at the same time making an effort to support American businesses. When it comes to design, trends will shift to locally made furniture, custom-built homes and pieces and materials that stand the test of time.

Find more information at nudura.com.
Short sale versus foreclosure

Shopping for real estate may require prospective buyers to learn a whole new language. Buyers may come across certain terms they don’t understand. Among the more common terms that first-time buyers may not fully understand are “short sale” and “foreclosure.”

According to Realtor.com, short sales and foreclosure auctions are situations that occur when homeowners fall behind on payments and can no longer afford to live in a home. A short sale happens when a homeowner owes more on the mortgage balance than the market value of the property when the owner needs to sell. The homeowner can ask the mortgage lender to accept a lesser amount than the total mortgage owed — making the homeowner/seller “short” on paying the lender back.

A foreclosure is a legal process that occurs when a borrower cannot make mortgage loan payments for a significant period of time. If the debt is not recouped, lenders will step in and take ownership of the property, putting it up for sale in a foreclosure auction.

While these situations can be troublesome for the homeowner facing financial peril, distressed properties can be advantageous for buyers who oftentimes can buy homes at steep discounts. However, short sales and foreclosures are not without challenges.

The real estate experts at Zillow say that foreclosures and short sales involve more layers than traditional transactions. Zillow offers that bank lenders historically can be slow at giving approval for mortgages to purchase short sale properties or even agreeing on an amount for the sale. As a result, buyers may miss out on other opportunities while waiting for short sales to move along.

Foreclosures carry their own hurdles. Buyers may not get a chance to even see a foreclosure property, nor be eligible to have it inspected, as foreclosed homes are typically sold “as-is” and at auction. The real estate agency Re/Max says buying a foreclosure typically is faster than buying a short sale, and an investor can buy a foreclosed home for below market value. But foreclosures cannot be contingent on the sale of another home, so a buyer must have funds in place and be ready to move quickly.

Short sales are often initiated by homeowners looking to avoid foreclosure. As a result, short sale properties may be in decent condition. This may not be the case with a foreclosure. The American Society of Home Inspectors says foreclosed homes may have been neglected by having utilities turned off and no maintenance done on the home. Other homes may have been purposefully vandalized by the former owner or by squatters.

Short sales and foreclosure properties are options for buyers who want to get the best price possible on a home and are willing to take some risks in their pursuits.
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