

Landscape

Securing A Competitive Edge

Pat Fox of Aralia Garden Design asks why developers and builders frequently fail to develop outside areas to their full potential.

DESPITE the accepted slowdown in housing sales, there still appears to be an abundance of new sites being developed for both commercial and domestic purpose.

As a garden designer, I am perplexed as to why, when so much time, trouble and effort goes into designing these super, new luxury homes, do the developers often leave the outside space, untouched, as a complete blank canvas? Do they imagine that the general public have no imagination for the interior of a property and therefore need a ready-designed house to move into? Do they therefore feel that the public want the garden to be a blank canvas so that they can imprint their personality on this one area?

Many of the new housing developments in the Herts and Essex area have been built with the outdoor space simply laid to lawn, although it is not uncommon to find new houses being sold without even lawns, just the bare earth. What is even

more interesting is that this is not just happening at the bottom end of the market, but also at the mid to top end. Properties on the recently developed estate, Bentleys, in Hatfield Heath, were selling in excess of £500k and still with no turf in site, just a field of mud!

Many new houses are now being marketed as part of a lifestyle, targeting their potential buyers with ideas on how they can relax, entertain and socialise in their new homes. But surely these buyers want to relax, entertain and socialise in their gardens too? Some developers are waking up to this concept, and are beginning to integrate the garden into the overall design process, rather than holding it on to the house as an afterthought. But so much more could be done to provide consumers with outdoor spaces that live up to the swish interiors that are being developed.

Last year The New Homes Garden Awards (NHGA) was launched for

the first time. These recognise, reward and generally worship house builders who respond to the lifestyle aspirations of their purchasers and make outside space a significant part of the new home experience. Local winners included Kings Oak (Designed by TC Landscapes), which was awarded gold for the category of 'Best Front Garden' for its simple but effective garden at Bramley Court, Dunstable. Entries for the 2006 competition will be required in January 2006. Further details can be found on the NHGA website (www.newhomesgardensawards.co.uk).

In the meantime purchasers of new homes are calling in local companies such as Aralia Garden Design, after the event, to design the outside spaces. One such property was a client in Hatfield Heath who purchased a five bedroom luxury house, which contained a very basic patio area, with the balance of the gar-

den simply laid to lawn. The clients had very strong views on what they were looking for. The brief in essence; extremely low maintenance, instant garden, contemporary look, spaces required for adult and child use. Aralia took this remit and came up with a plan, which included a sweeping semi-circular patio, large enough for big social events and plenty of space for the little ones to play. Large exotic planting was introduced, which provided not only instant impact, but somewhere for the children to run through and play, and best of all, virtually maintenance free! A new decking area was introduced at the far corner of the garden to capture the late afternoon sun, and provide somewhere for a quiet drink for the adults. Aralia then incorporated a lighting system to enable their clients to use the garden at night, but also to be able to see their garden, from the inside looking out - all through the year.

Garden briefs, such as

the above, are not uncommon. The brief received from this client, is fairly typical of an executive couple, in their 30s, with small children. Isn't it time that more developers and builders started examining the benefits of pre-designing gardens for their target market? In a competitive market they could really secure a competitive edge by offering their clients outdoor spaces that fit their lifestyle and aspirations. It is also a fantastic opportunity to differentiate themselves from the crowd and to do something truly innovative.

A well-designed garden, does not only help sell a new home, but also has a significant role to play in the general housing market. Local estate agents, Mullucks & Wells, believe that although it is difficult to quantify statistically the value of a garden, it is undoubtedly a differentiating factor between properties and can be used to great effect. "If you take a typical '70s house, lacking any real

character and no real selling features," says William Wells of Mullucks & Wells, "you can really differentiate it from any others on the market if it has a stylish garden. This immediately provides us with something to work with and build on, to attract potential clients." Garden styles have changed significantly over the last 30 years so if you are looking to sell your home, in a few years time, it may be worth looking now at updating your external space, to bring it in line with current trends, to provide your home overall with maximum appeal.

Aralia Garden Design would be happy to take enquiries from any local developers or new build companies. We would love the opportunity of discussing how we could work with you to introduce innovative outdoor spaces, with a commercial value-added approach. To find out more please contact Aralia Garden Design on 01279 730 040 or e-mail info@aralia.org.uk