



Viewpoint

Viewpoint: Single-story great rooms cut energy costs, add grandeur

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The era of the two-story great room is coming to an end.

Soaring double-height rooms that were popular a decade ago have fallen out of favor as Atlanta luxury homebuyers instead choose single-story rooms with generous 12-foot ceiling heights that give the space a better sense of grandeur.

In addition to drastically reducing heating and cooling costs, these more modestly scaled rooms also make the space seem visually bigger. That may seem counterintuitive, but the relative horizontal and vertical proportions are more harmonious and appealing when there is just one story with ceilings that are taller than usual.

Single-story great rooms are a departure from the excessive design mentality of the 2000s, when many luxury homes featured double-height rooms in an effort to create a “wow” factor.

Savvy designers and discerning homebuyers soon realized that those double-height great rooms just don’t make sense. They warp the sense of scale and visually trick the eye into perceiving the room as being smaller than it is, which defeats the intended purpose of making them seem grand.

Those enormous rooms also trap air in all that unused space, pushing energy costs higher and forcing some homes to scale up to a larger HVAC system just to heat and cool empty space.

We’ve experimented with different ceiling heights over the years, and we’ve found that 12-foot ceilings throughout the home are ideal. That is now our standard height for homes that we design and build, such as those in The Manor Golf and Country Club in Alpharetta/Milton, Buckhead or Sandy Springs.

While some builders use 10-foot ceilings throughout most of the homes and then create 12-foot ceilings in areas such as great rooms, we at Loudermilk Homes think this results in a clumsy design and layout. That two-foot differential usually requires an awkward two-step landing on the second floor to accommodate the mismatched ceiling heights, and homes are more elegant when they are designed with consistent ceiling heights throughout.

Twelve-foot ceilings create an attractive sense of scale while also respecting the horizontal and vertical ratios that give a home the right visual proportions. Homebuyers and their guests notice it immediately, from the



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Sherwin Loudermilk is CEO of Loudermilk Homes.

first impression when they walk in the front door to a more impactful sense of spaciousness in the kitchen and great room.

Beyond the visual appeal, a single-story great room is also more energy efficient.

A great room measuring 20 feet by 20 feet with 12-foot ceilings uses 47 percent less energy per year than one with 22-foot ceilings, according to an energy use intensity (EUI) study conducted by Mahsa Minaei, a project estimator for Loudermilk Homes who is finishing her PhD in high performance buildings at Georgia Tech.

That means a single-story great room can lower energy bills for that room by about half compared with double-story great rooms that were popular in the past. That's better for the environment, and for your pocketbook.

Homebuyers tell us that a well-designed great room is more important than ever amid busy lifestyles and packed schedules, which is why we spend extra time and attention making sure those rooms are perfect. Builders can install unique features such as panoramic wall-to-wall sliding pocket door systems that can be completely opened to connect with outdoor living spaces, and we make sure there are plenty of USB charging outlets for everyone's mobile devices. Other energy efficient features include electronic window shades that can automatically lower themselves when the sun gets too bright or a room gets too hot, and wifi-connected smart thermostats that can go idle when no activity is detected for a certain period of time. Builders also can value-engineer a home by stacking walls and efficiently designing air duct placement, plumbing and electrical for optimal efficiency, further reducing energy and water usage.

These are just some of the examples of a new era of energy efficiency sophistication to Atlanta's luxury design-and-build housing market.