

Homeowners begin to loosen purse strings for home-improvement projects

By Andrea Chang

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LOS ANGELES — Spring cleaning is turning into spring remodeling this year for many homeowners.

Home improvement projects are starting to make a comeback after frugal consumers pulled the plug on remodeling and renovation work during the downturn.

With the economy showing signs of stabilizing and retailers and contractors continuing to offer good deals, homeowners are sprucing up their homes' appearance and value by repainting their bathrooms, installing new floors and carpets, and upgrading their kitchens.

Maritza Vega Gentry, a property manager from Glendale, Calif., said she'd hoped to begin remodeling her home in 2007 but put her plans on hold when the stock market crashed. This year, she said, she's feeling more confident about the economy and plans to spend at least \$5,000 on recessed kitchen lighting, ceiling fans and two sun roofs.

"I just sat back and waited for three

years," Gentry, 57, said while checking out light fixtures at Home Depot in Burbank, Calif., recently. "Now I'm back to doing what I was supposed to be doing: remodeling and taking care of business. I'm doing every repair that I can right now."

In a survey released last week by American Express, 62 percent of homeowners said they planned to embark on home improvement projects in 2010, spending an average of \$6,200 on enhancements.

It's a relief for the battered home improvement market, which saw consumer spending plummet about 27 percent since 2007 as homeowners delayed or scrapped remodeling plans.

According to a report this month by the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, the sector is estimated to see nearly 5 percent growth in 2010 — although industry experts caution that a full rebound will take a while.

"The gradual recovery in the broader economy should encourage more remodeling spending by homeowners," said Nicolas P. Retsinas, director of the

housing studies center. "This year could produce the first annual spending increase for the industry since 2006."

In their most recent earnings reports, Home Depot Inc. and Lowe's Cos., the nation's two largest home improvement retailers, posted better-than-expected fourth-quarter results and said consumers seemed to be more willing to take on costlier projects.

At Lowe's, based in Mooresville, N.C., "the worst of the economic cycle is likely behind us," Chief Executive Robert A. Niblock said in a call with analysts.

Atlanta-based Home Depot said fourth-quarter business picked up in some areas in California and Florida — states hit especially hard by the housing crisis — and said that of its top 40 U.S. markets, all but two showed improvement at same-store sales, or sales at stores open at least a year.

"All of this gives us some cause for optimism in 2010," Chief Executive Frank Blake said in a call with analysts. "We've been waiting for this transition for a long time."

For fiscal 2010, Home Depot estimated

that same-store sales would increase 2.5 percent; Lowe's projected that its same-store sales would rise 1 percent to 3 percent.

Business still isn't where it used to be for Sergio De Paula, 45, a general contractor from South Pasadena, Calif., who specializes in installing outdoor kitchens. In the last few years, he saw revenue decline 40 percent to 60 percent as clients halted projects or opted for more modest outdoor setups.

"Now that the worst of the housing crisis is over, they're starting to invest again, so we're getting a lot more calls," De Paula said. "It's nowhere near pre-recession levels, but at least it's starting."

Joe McFarland, western division president at Home Depot, said many customers are now opting for do-it-yourself projects instead of hiring professionals, leading to a boost in sales of power tools, fertilizer and fruit and vegetable plants.

"The downturn changed people's outlook on the way they spend money for years to come," he said. "We're all anxiously awaiting what the new normal will be."

Playing with marble: Timeless elegance for the home

By Susan Murphy Casey

MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

What might the gray-streaked stone atop your heirloom furniture have in common with a public statue?

Both are made of Carrara marble, quarried in Italy and long used in furniture as well as statues and fountains.

"Carrara marble has a timeless look," Amy Sanders of International Materials of Design says. "It's not conservative, but it's not glitzy."

Carrara is a white marble heavily streaked with small gray veins. Also popular (and roughly three times as expensive) is Calacatta gold, which is a brighter white with fewer (but usually larger) veins of brown, gold or green, depending on where it was quarried.

White marble can bring class to a kitchen, bathroom, fireplace or entryway. Because marble comes in the form of tiles, slabs, mosaics and moldings, homeowners often finish an entire room for a stunning look, Leslie Erickson of Carthage Marble in Kansas City says.

The cost of decking the room can add up quickly, particularly if the fabrication is detailed, but there are cost-

conscious ways to add white marble to a home.

"Consider resurfacing small areas that are focal points of a room, like a kitchen island or a coffee or end table," Erickson says. It's also common for customers to buy marble to fit a favorite table base and replace a worn or ugly top.

For projects such as tables and even small bathroom vanities and backsplashes, Erickson suggests marble remnants, which can cost less than 40 percent of the original price. For a small vanity, say 2 feet by 4 feet, seek remnants from slab and tiles or mosaics, Erickson says.

Other less expensive options include a sundry tower from Pottery Barn (\$399) with a Carrara marble top or a "Carrara-style" marble table from CB2 (\$299; www.cb2.com).

Whatever the use — but particularly in a kitchen or bathroom — be aware that marble is a porous material. Some homeowners seek the look of worn, aged marble because of its natural beauty, says Katie Gruenewalk of Kitchen Studio in Kansas City, Mo.

"But if you want it pristine and perfect, it may not be the right option," she says.

Care of marble starts with choice of

finish. Polished marble has a vibrant shine, Sue Shinneman of Kitchen Studio says. But acidic foods such as juice or mayonnaise easily etch polished marble, resulting in dull marks. Periodically, you will have to have it sanded down and re-polished.

Homeowners can avoid re-polishing by having the marble honed or "roughed up" for an antiqued look that will wear better, Shinneman says.

MARBLE MAINTENANCE

Advice differs about upkeep and stain-guarding marble, whether it's polished or honed, but a few tips are universal.

Find out if your marble was treated with a stain-resistant sealant before installation. Have it re-sealed yearly or as needed (when beads of water absorb easily).

Use non-ammonia-based cleaner for minor spills. Some experts suggest commercial marble cleaners for tougher stains or a poultice with a baking soda base.

Granite Shield of Kansas City applies an additional marble sealant after installation with a lifetime warranty against stains, but not etching.

Declutter your bedroom

A bedroom should be a sanctuary, but clutter can make it a source of stress. Here are some tips for organizing the bedroom from professional organizer Scott Roewer of Solutions by Scott in Washington, D.C.:

— If you find yourself throwing clothes on the floor or using the treadmill as a closet, add a bedroom valet or garment holder to the room.

They provide an easy way to preserve and organize clothes until you're ready to put the clothing away.

— Reduce the knickknacks on dressers and nightstands to make them less cluttered and easier to dust. Select the two or three nonessential items that are most special to you, and put the rest in storage or display them in another room.

— Store out-of-season clothes and other items in under-bed containers after you've cleaned them. Cedar boxes help deter moths, but line them with plain, unbleached muslin to protect fabrics from the wood's acidity. Use canvas bags that zip shut for delicate items such as cashmere sweaters.