

MANSION

THE MARKET

Blueprint for a Custom Home

Does that mansion look familiar? More people are buying luxury building plans online, then customizing them to add individual touches; paying extra for a soaking tub and wine-tasting room

BY KELLI B. GRANT

FLOWERS, SHOES, pizza: Consumer goods are easy to order online. Now, more people are dropping thousands of dollars to buy—and customize—luxury-home plans over the Internet.

Sites like ThePlanCollection.com and ePlans.com—which sell blueprints that can be handed off to a builder for construction—say plans for high-end homes are particularly popular. During the recession, the majority of ePlans.com's top-selling homes were luxury models surpassing 3,000 square feet, says Hillary Gottemoeller, content director of consumer print and e-media for Hanley Wood Business Media. The company's holdings also include HomePlans.com, FloorPlans.com and DreamHomeSource.com.

Now that the real-estate market is picking up, sites are reporting an uptick in plan sales. The sites declined to provide specific numbers, but each say a few thousand plans are sold every year. Smaller layouts are increasingly popular, Ms. Gottemoeller says, but even these have design details that, with expensive taste, can jack up building costs above \$1 million. For example, the master bathroom might have a shower and a soaking tub; porches may include an indoor/outdoor kitchen and fireplace.

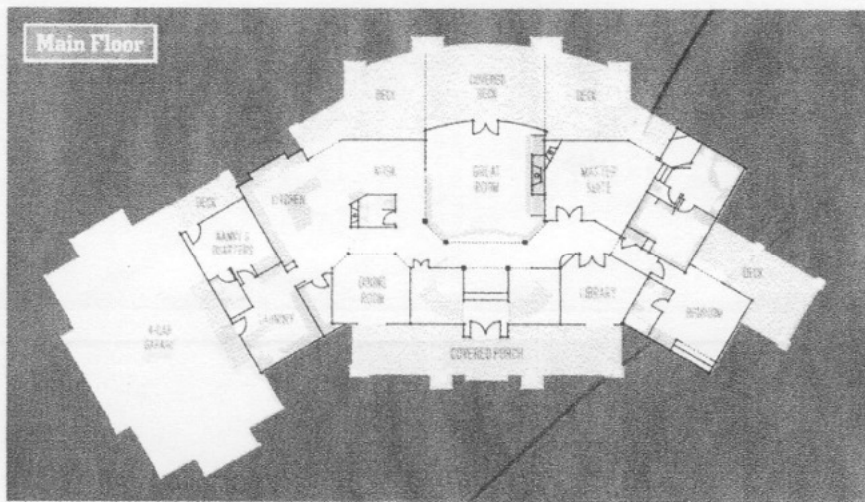
At ThePlanCollection.com, average sales have risen from \$400 to \$3,000 over the past decade, in part reflecting homeowners' desire for more intricate plans with amenities such as his-and-hers walk-in closets, chef-quality kitchens and outdoor "BBQ porches," says Chief Executive Officer Brian Toolan.

"They're looking to make sure everything is high-end," he says. Square footage, meanwhile, has more than doubled from a typical 2,000 square feet to north of 5,000.

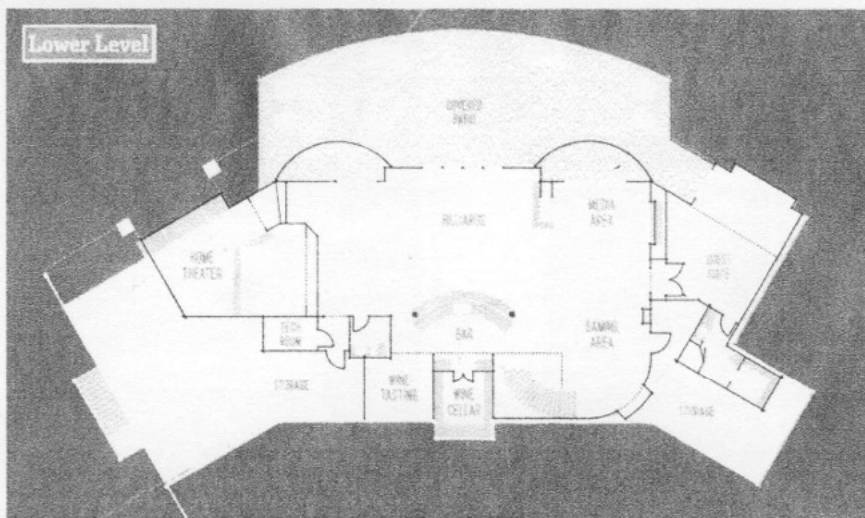
Today's luxury-plan buyers are tending toward sprawling single-level homes. "Because they have bigger lots, they can spread out a little more," says Ms. Gottemoeller. Also, the rooms are less defined, with the family room, kitchen and dining space blending into a large open hub, says Mr. Toolan. Designers are also incorporating more "flex rooms," positioned so that they might be a dining room or office, a guest room or a home gym.

At ePlans, four out of five buyers alter plans, Ms. Gottemoeller says. Common changes include adding a bedroom or bathroom and expanding the kitchen, but designers have also changed exterior architectural styles and added unique features. "One client wanted a four-story garage with a bomb shelter underneath and a fireman's pole all the way down," she recalls.

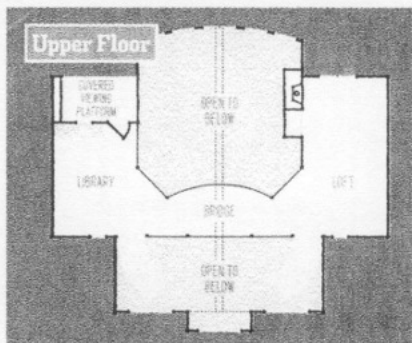
After purchase, sites connect buy-



3,940 FINISHED SQUARE FEET Four bedrooms, four full bathrooms, two half baths, four-car garage



2,817 FINISHED SQUARE FEET Specialty rooms: home theater, media room, gaming area, wine cellar and tech room



647 SQUARE FEET Space includes a viewing platform that overlooks the backyard and deck below.



DESIGNER HOME This 7404-square-foot luxury home plan is offered by ThePlanCollection.com. Prices range from \$2,400 for construction drawings to \$4,250 for a CAD file with digitized plans. Modifications to customize the layout cost extra.

ers who want to customize a plan with the architect or designer who created it. One-on-one phone consultations are typically free, but executing the changes costs extra. "Adding a fireplace might be a few hundred dollars," says Ms. Gottemoeller. More expensive changes that increase the square footage can cost upward of \$1,000.

Depending on the square footage and design, a set of blueprints purchased online as-is can cost less than \$500; plans that allow for modification and customization can run more than \$5,000. Less-expensive options include sets of five or more blueprints, while pricier packages might include a reproducible master or a disc with PDF or computer-aided-design (CAD) files, which experts say are easier to modify than print plans. Prices can come in well under the cost to hire an architect to craft plans from scratch, which could cost more than \$200 per hour, or 10% to 20% of the building cost.

Buying plans online can have limitations, some architects say. "Building codes can be very regional," says Chris Egner, principal at Chris Egner Design-Build-Remodel in Milwaukee. Buyers may find that pre-made plans need further modifications from a local builder to account for local requirements, such as snow loads and energy efficiency. The cost for revisions can eclipse any upfront savings from buying a plan online, says John Isch, principal at RWA Architects in Cincinnati and the chairman of the American Institute of Architects Custom Residential Architects Network, a trade group.

Employing a designer who isn't on-site can have aesthetic pitfalls, too—ones that go beyond a generic design, Mr. Isch says. "When you buy a plan in a plan book, it takes no account into orientation of rooms," he says. "You may have this distant view that the house won't sit on the site in such a way to take advantage of."

Mr. Toolan of ThePlanCollection.com agrees that people who buy blueprints online should work with their builder to ensure that the plans comply with local code and are suitable for building-site conditions. Online sites are a good starting point, especially for people looking to build a luxury home.

"If you live in New York, Houston, Los Angeles, it's pretty easy to get access to top-end designers and architects who have a long track record of building high-end homes," he says. "But we see a lot of high-square-footage sales in places we've never heard of until we got the order, where you're not going to find a Neiman Marcus or Bergdorf Goodman."

► What do buyers want in a floorplan? See an interactive graphic at WSJ.com/Mansion.

Illustrations by Arthur Moore; The Plan Collection (original plans, photo)