Not exactly la bella figura

No luxury spared: a Scott Grunst design for a southern Californian Tuscan villa

Scott M. Grunst

When Californians get their hands on Tuscan style, all sorts of horrors can emerge. Sarah E. Richards braces herself for the worst

With all the olive trees and salmon and mustard stucco dominating southern California high-end housing developments these days, it's tempting to imagine you have stepped into the Tuscan countryside. Open the doors, however, and the fantasy fades.

Luxury homeowners can't get enough of the Old World style – albeit with a big dose of American indulgence.

Especially in southern California, buyers are snapping up multimillion-dollar villas stuffed with amenities few Italians could imagine. There are the basics: soundproofed media rooms with seating for 10, exercise nooks off the master suite, walnut-paneled, coffered-ceiling libraries, five-car garages, detached guest homes that double as home offices and more oversized fireplaces than trees.

Don't forget bathrooms with spa-worthy steam showers, saunas, 10ft-long hot tubs and rarely-used bidets. In the kitchen, double dishwashers, industrial stoves and butlers' pantries connecting to the dining room are standard. Outside, owners enjoy hulking custom barbecues outfitted with ice machines and bread-warming drawers that also can be used to heat up towels for chilly swimmers – who likely have climbed out of pools with disappearing edges that look as if the water runs into infinity.

Also popular are "loggias", or covered patios, with outdoor fireplaces and room for plasma televisions. And who could call a villa a home without an elevator to transport residents to the second floor and back – or a temperature-controlled wine cellar, which really isn't a cellar at all, but a separate showpiece room lined in stone with museum lighting? It's a must "for the resale value", says Scott Grunst, a San Diego architect who has seen demand for such 6,000 to 12,000 sq ft, ultra-appointed homes soar in the last few years.

One homeowner, whose family recently moved to the Rancho Pacifica development near the Del Mar Racetrack, agrees – even if he's currently using his particular wine room as a shoe closet.

"We love the bells and whistles," says Hayden Ross, as he showed off his remote-controlled fireplace and computer and high-density television network. When you're building a $2.5-$4.5m (£1.5-£2.7m) home, buyers expect a lot of house for the money." He's added a few more touches, including a putting green in the backyard and four televisions inside his "loggia" so he can watch the Superbowl from any angle.

And the family of four likes every inch of their 8,600 sq ft home. "It's handy," says Ross. Adds his wife, Carmen: "We do use the intercom system a lot. You have to have that."

"As land costs soar in nearly every American metropolitan market, architects are being asked to create dream homes – with more features on smaller and smaller lots. People want more house and less yard," says Neil Denari, professor of architecture at the University of California at Los Angeles. He

says that over the last 50 years house sizes have increased along with incomes, yet lot sizes have not. John Ciccone, a luxury custom-home builder in San Diego, says the land and home can cost $1,000 to $1,200 a square foot "meaning a multimillion dollar home will be built on a third or half of an acre. The land is so spare it's ridiculous. They're mostly postage-sized lots." These aren't sprawling Tuscan estates.

'There are houses with a $4m price tag where you enter the door and walk right into the dining room. It's enough to make you shout, "Basta!"'

In southern California, streets tend to be crowded with boxy mansions with super-sized everything: 16ft ceilings, wide hallways, interior concrete arches, fat crown mouldings, heavy iron light fixtures and great rooms with pocket doors or rolling walls to bring the outside in. Living rooms are so big that normal-sized furniture looks like it belongs in a child's room.

There's little restraint in the master suite, either. With private courtyards, exercise rooms, his-and-her toilet rooms, sinks and closets complete with dressing islands, these wings may take up 1,500 sq ft, says architect Heber Hurd. In comparison, a traditional three-bedroom tract home would be 1,800 sq ft.

Architects do make the most of their lots, though. Hurd likes to design 15ft by 20ft picture windows that showcase lake-sized pools surrounded by rock waterfalls and lush landscaping from the entry way. "When you open the front door, your eyeballs get ripped out of your head," he says. "It's called focused views."

Perhaps Tuscan-inspired is a better description of the trend. While some architects stay true to the style with a mix of stone and stucco, recessed windows, multileveled roofs with overhangs, wood accents and charming Romeo-and-Juliet balconies, others tend to experiment. Some classic Tuscan homes will feature Arabesque chimneys, château roofs or Japanese pagoda-style entrances – giving some developments more the feel of Epcot Center than suburban Florence.

Some fusion works, such as the Ross family's Colonial-esque wainscoting. Some doesn't. For example, it's not uncommon to walk out of an elegant living room reminiscent of an English manor house and into a great room that looks like an Aspen ski lodge with stone fireplaces and monstrous ceiling beams.

"So many of these houses are just big," says Hurd, explaining that traditional Tuscan rooms are narrower. "In more historically authentic house, there's more proportion between the doors, windows and walls."

He sees a lot of walls that are all stucco or all glass. "They're ugly," he says. "Bigger is not always better. It has to be well-balanced."

He also sees a lot of big design goofs, such as lack of flow or circulation throughout a home. "There are some houses with a $4m price tag where you enter the door and walk right into the dining room. It's enough to make some architects shout, 'Basta!' We're all sick of Tuscan," Hurd continues. "It's become the latest buzzword. Everyone asks for it. But it's overdone. It's a cliché now."

Just a few years ago, this Tuscan cliché used to be the inventive alternative to the tired Spanish ranch or California mission trends. With Tuscan, architects could offer a fresh twist to the so-called Mediterranean style loved by developments' design review boards – which Hurd calls the fashion police. Denari isn't impressed either by the conspicuous consumption or the architectural impact. "This market is inhabited by people who don't have a vision of a contemporary through architecture," he says. "There's no innovation, and it's not a newer or better paradigm. Culture should be about innovation."