

Building Scene

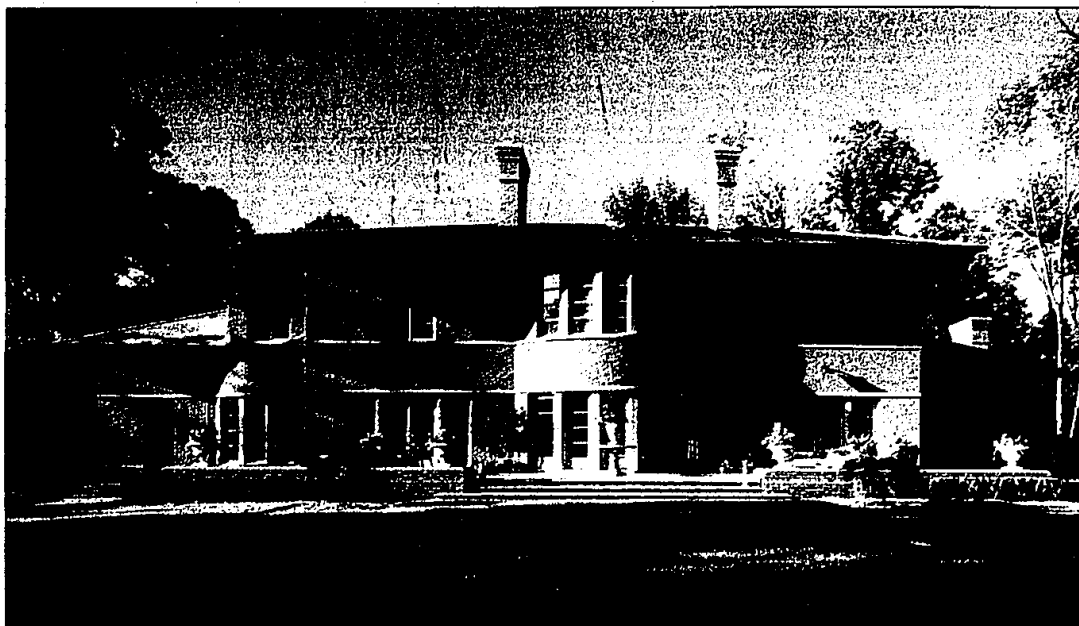
CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

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photos by GLEN CALVIN MOON

Judges for the Builder Magazine Builder's Choice awards were particularly impressed with the character of the Woodlynn's balanced rear facade accented by the strong horizontal bands and gentle, two-story bay.

Just grand: Builder's classical house earns trade magazine award

"Good design is more than just a pretty face. It's about the way buildings and communities function day to day, regardless of economic ebbs and flows. The 36 winners of the 1991 Builder's Choice Design and Planning Awards exemplify this durable quality." — Builder Magazine

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

CLASSICAL SYMMETRY never goes out of style. So begins a brief description of the design of Woodlynn, a 5,400-square-foot custom home built by the Birmingham-based David Jensen Building Corp., and the winner of a grand award in the annual Builder's Choice awards sponsored by Builder Magazine.

It's not every day a house is chosen for such an award. In fact, in the 15 years the awards have been given, no one can recall a Michigan house, or even a house from the Midwest, being chosen.

That changes this year.

David Jensen, president of the building company, said he set out not to build an award-winning house, but a "special" house.

"I think that in a lifetime, you try to get recognition of anything you've done," Jensen said. That doesn't necessarily mean he wanted to win an award — only that he wanted to build a home with character, dignity and a timeless quality.

'It's not just a series of spaces. Good architecture is a matter of taste, but what they've done is created a timeless house.'

— Builder David Jensen

The award was for the first house in the Woodlynn development — a 23-acre site in Bloomfield Township near 13 Mile and Bingham roads — designed by Rick Lamb Associates in Cambridge, Mass. Homes in the development sell in the \$1 million range.

Jensen said the site was designed to give a quiet "Connecticut-like" feel. The award-winning home was designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects in New York City.

Since that first project, a second home has been built, another starts construction this month, and three are in early planning, Jensen said.

HIS GRAND AWARD house was what he likes to call "a perilous venture."

Built on speculation, meaning there was no buyer prior to construction, Jensen said he realized the first house would set the tone for the entire development.

The house was intentionally built on a grand scale. Overlaid rooms, smooth circulation patterns, custom molding and trim, a circular staircase, solid materials, an impressive entry court created by

symmetrical placement of a three-car garage and a living room, high ceilings and large, well-placed windows to allow extensive use of natural light all combine to give the home a majestic feel.

At the same time, Jensen said there are more subtle touches to the home that give it a human scale. An oval dining room tempers the harsh, rectangular geometry common in most homes, a well-separated private area for bedrooms, and one of Jensen's favorite features, a back stairway.

"It's not just a series of spaces. Good architecture is a matter of taste, but what they've done is created a timeless house," Jensen said.

"Most people (who have seen the house) feel this is a bold stroke," he said. "This is a very Midwestern, conservative community. This house is way outside the norm."

Which isn't to say the home is wild or contemporary. "We (in this area) have been flooded with a series of homes that are simply knock-offs of other homes."

"An awful lot of architecture is garish and loud like a bratty kid



The house's "classical symmetry" was noted in the balance and workmanship and the courtyard created by the garage and living room jutting from the house. Judges also were impressed with many of the interior design features.

demanding attention. There is a quietness to significant architecture," Jensen said.

The Woodlynn, Jensen said, is a reinterpretation of the classical homes found in some of Detroit's older subdivisions.

GRANT MARANI, project coordinator and an associate at Robert A.M. Stern Architects, said a builder's choice award (particularly a grand award) is a very reputable award in the design industry. "It's quite coveted."

Builder magazine asks some of the best known names in the building and design industries to judge the contest, he said.

This year, winners were chosen by a panel of nationally acclaimed architects like John D. Bloodgood, president of Bloodgood & Sharp; Snider Architects & Planners Inc., site planners like Andres Duany, principal with the Miami-based Andres Duany and Elizabeth Palter-Zyberk Architects and Town Planners; builders like Harold Lynch Jr., president of Newport Beach-based RGC (Recreation Group of Companies), and design journalists like Witold Rybczynski, author and professor of architecture at McGill University in Montreal to name just a few.

Marani said the design that eventually became the Woodlynn home was a result of several trips to the area. "We were concerned with making a design that had architecture that reflected the Midwest."

He has found that when an out-of-state firm tries to impose its own style on a home, people in the area reject it.

Marani said although his firm has built homes in the Midwest, this was the first in Michigan, which meant a considerable amount of study. "We wanted a home that reflected many of the great homes in Detroit's older neighborhoods."

"One of the advantages of being an out-of-town architect is that you have a different perspective. There is a sense of the classical in these homes."

'An awful lot of architecture is garish and loud like a bratty kid demanding attention. There is a quietness to significant architecture.'

— Builder David Jensen

SOME OF THE features that they set out to include were predominant roof forms, a horizontal design base, solid materials like brick and stone, a symmetry to the overall design.

At the same time, the design was also meant to be a reinterpretation of the older homes. "They belong to the same style of architecture — if not the same architecture."

For example, the architects designed the front with a more defined entrance and a fan window to give the house a vertical element, but still retain an overall horizontal feel.

The back of the house includes a strong horizontal band and a two-story gentle, curving bay.

Some of the interior features include a two-story entry, a grand high-ceilinged living room, and the oval dining room — all incorporating modern design practices to better control movement through the home.

Marani also noted the extensive use of natural illumination. "The home faces north, so we wanted to design the home to work with that — it captures both morning and evening light."

SUSAN BRADFORD, senior editor for design at Builder Magazine, said this is the first project she can recall from Michigan, but may not be the first project in the Midwest. "We don't keep a running list of all the winners."

Bradford said the lack of Builder's Choice houses isn't necessarily a result of Midwestern homes being poorly designed. "We don't get many entries from the Midwest."

Why few Midwest builders enter

the contest, she said, is open to speculation. "There seems to be a reluctance on the part of Midwestern builders to hire good photographers. We don't have the staff or budget to send photographers all over the country, so we rely on the builder to furnish the photographs, and for a magazine we need very high quality photographs."

But that is not the only reason. Midwestern design standards are not necessarily bad design, but the Builder's Choice awards measure innovation. Most of the architectural innovations, they have found, generally occur in the East and West and then trends move inward.

"This isn't always true, but that's generally the pattern," she said.

In fact, several judges criticized the lack of innovation in projects built in the South and Southwest, where architectural styles are predominantly Mediterranean.

There was also surprisingly few entries from the East Coast. Judges speculated that the slow housing market there has greatly decreased innovation. "When times are tough, builders are going to hold back and stick with the tried and true that sells well, not be innovative and take a risk."

The Builder's Choice awards is an annual selection of the best national builders have to offer, sponsored by the magazine and the National Association of Home Builders.

More than 650 projects were submitted for the awards. Thirty-six winners were selected — one project of the year, one focus on affordability award, 10 grand awards, 20 merit awards, and four special focus awards.

'The projects they (judges) chose to honor are attractive and efficient places in which to live, work and play. Whether traditional or contemporary, small-town or cityfied, their beauty goes far beyond skin deep. Much attention has been paid to the way these projects read from the street. Garages are set back, canted or tucked under to minimize the automobile's impact. Common materials are used in fresh new ways; so is color. And most important of all, this year's Builder's Choice award winners are good and responsible neighbors to the communities that surround them.'

— Builder Magazine