

Building Scene

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By R.J. King
special writer

When Craig and Nancy Lentini first sat down to study the purchase contract to their dream house, an English Tudor they were having built by a developer in Troy, they noticed the contract was too generic.

"We looked at the literature describing the home, and it listed a high-efficiency water heater, but in the purchase contract it just listed a water heater, so we had that changed," said Craig, a marine account manager for Ford Motor Co.

"In fact, all the appliances in the purchase contract were listed as dishwasher, or 'stove,' so we had the contract changed right down to adding the model numbers of the appliances so we knew what we were getting."

The Lentinis bought their first house in Bloomfield Hills in 1982. Four or five years ago they started looking to build their Tudor. When they found the Oak River East subdivision, they started looking at the houses offered by the six builders working in the subdivision before signing a contract with Bing Master Builder in January of 1988. They moved into their \$300,000-plus house in August of the same year.

In looking back at their first building experience, Nancy, a product planner for Chevrolet, said her only regret was not talking more to neighbors.

"In building a house, there's so many opportunities to spend money that you have to be very careful," she said. "We found introducing ourselves to people on our street saved us a lot of time in shopping around."

The introductions also paid off economically. Taking a tip from a neighbor, the Lentinis found a nearby store that offered a wide selection of interior and exterior lighting fixtures. By shopping for lights on their own, they were able to save \$2,000 as compared to the builder's quotation.

"If you're handy, you're able to save a lot of money," Craig added. "Every home here requires a sprinkler system for the lawn, and the builder wanted \$2,000 to put it in. By doing it myself, it only cost \$1,000."

Landscaping was the same story. The Lentinis learned a couple down



staff photos by JIM RIDER

Craig and Nancy Lentini found building their dream English Tudor a satisfying experience.

DREAM HOME

A guide to What to ask before you start.



Craig, Nancy and Kathryn Lentini

the street spent \$18,000 to plant on their lot, but by taking hints from neighbors and shopping around, the Lentinis bought and planted their choice of trees and shrubs and spent just slightly more than \$5,000.

"Labor costs a lot of money, so any time you can do something yourself, it really pays off," Craig said. "And the money you save on improvements to the home makes it appreciate that much quicker."

The Lentinis also recommended first-time builders double check all estimates and inspect the builder's progress on a day-to-day basis. For instance, a salesman underestimated the couple's tax assessment by \$3,000. In another case, the circular stairway leading to the second floor was uneven and had to be removed.

But aside from all the problems and the countless decisions, the Lentinis said their house is exactly tailored to their aspirations and lifestyle.

"The experience was really worth it," Nancy said. "We're very happy with our home, and if we had to build again, we'd do it in a second." 30

Starting with the drawing board

By Nora Richter Greer
special writer

When you hire an architect, you're asking him or her to give form to your dream by developing a design that fits your needs, your lifestyle and your budget.

To find the architect who's right for you, be prepared to do your homework, says Chicago architect Margaret I. McCurry. Check with friends or relatives who have worked with architects. Drive through the area in which you

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Building demands attention to detail

By R.J. King
special writer

When Meadow Brook Hall was first built by Matilda Dodge Wilson and her husband Alfred in 1929, no expense was spared on the Tiffany and Waterford light fixtures, the hand-carved plaster ceilings and the pewabic tile bathrooms that make up the Rochester Hills estate. The 100-room "dream home" took more than three years to build and \$4 million to complete.

While nearly everyone shares the fantasy of living in beautiful surroundings, only a few can afford the splendor of Meadow Brook Hall. "Most people find that their dreams are bigger than their pocketbooks," said Gunnar Birkerts, a partner in Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, an architectural firm in Birmingham. "But once people balance reality with their dreams, they usually find they can afford a custom-built home, and one that fits their lifestyle and image."

The first step toward building your dream home is to determine a location.

"Find out what community offers the best amenities for your family," said James Donado, president of the Southeastern Michigan Home Builders' Association who owns a Plymouth building company. "Is there shopping close by? Where do you want your children to go to school? Is there a recycling program? Once that's settled, the next step is to decide what kind of house you want."

Jack Sayle, president of Sayle Building Co. in Troy, looks at location in terms of property values.

"While an inexpensive piece of property may be appealing, in the long run, it may not increase in value as fast as a home located in a thriving neighborhood. It also pays to know if a technology park or large commercial building will be located next door some day. That could serve to appreciate or depreciate property values, so it pays to ask questions."

First-time builders should also be prepared to deal with zoning laws. Many communities have strict codes in force concerning building specifications and layouts. In the Indian Mound area of Bloomfield Township, for instance, zoning laws specify that garages must be attached to the home and accessible from the rear.

To determine whether your dream house will meet community requirements, talk with city building officials and owners of custom-built homes in the area in which you want to live. Local real estate agents, builders and architects also have information about available land, market prices, mortgage financing, insurance, real estate taxes, permit fees and landscaping.

IN SEARCHING for available property, a great deal of time can be saved by consulting a local real estate agent, said Steve S. Cole, associate broker of RE/MAX Professionals II in Troy.

"Often times a real estate office will have computers which can locate property quickly and pro-

vide all the necessary information concerning price, ownership and zoning laws particular to that area." (There may be a small fee for this service.)

The next step is to match your dreams with the needs of your family. For instance, how many bedrooms will you need? Do you plan on entertaining? If so, does your house need a deck or patio? Do you require any special rooms such as an artist studio, music room or mother-in-law suite? How much garage space do you need?

To put a price tag on your dream, a local architect or builder will often provide a range of current square-foot costs of houses in a particular area. Saylor said that the square-foot cost for a home can range from \$50 to \$100.

BY THIS TIME, people may believe planning for a dream home will prove to be too time-consuming, Saylor said. "Not that many people set out to build their dream home from scratch. People either have a strong passion for designing and overseeing building of their dream home or a great deal of time on their hands. What we find most people do is select a developer who fits their style and then tailor a choice of available models to their exact needs."

But while your dream home may often cost more than an older home of comparable size or a new house built by a developer according to a set plan, an exceptional custom-built house — often designed for energy savings and flexibility of living spaces — can command a higher resale value than other alternatives.

And beyond economics, a dream home is also tailored to the owner's special requirements, aspirations and lifestyle.

"Really a dream home has to be designed to make the family feel good about themselves and about the world in which they live," said Bill Finnicum, president of Finnicum, Brownlie Architects in Franklin. "The future owners have to ask themselves what does the house need to evoke in the way of emotions, even down to their sense of humor."

Just as your bank or mortgage company will investigate your finances, so should you check into your builder's.

"You're the buyer and you want to be secure in your heart that you will be pleased with the final product," Bonadio said. "By all means, ask the builder or architect for the name of their bank and do as much background checking as you can. Building a home is the biggest deal most people ever become involved in, so make sure everything is on the level."

The next step is to maintain an open dialogue with the various parties involved and to check progress on a regular basis.

"The most important thing is empathy on both sides," said Birkerts. "Designing or building a home is a very private and personal matter. The architect or builder literally becomes a member of the family. It's your lifestyle and your image which you will live with for the rest of your life, so it's very important to always communicate."

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