

Building Scene

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Buyers looking for custom touches in production houses

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Brad and Mary Contrucci wanted a home that was distinctly their own. They looked around at models and liked a lot of what they saw, but there were a couple of things that just didn't click.

They considered a custom home, but decided that they really liked the Devonshire model at Vintage Estates in Rochester Hills with one exception — the nearly floor to ceiling windows in the living room.

"I was petrified at the thought of the heating and cooling costs (because the room was on the south side of the home)," Brad Contrucci said. So the couple went back to the builder and asked if it might be possible to move the room to the other side of the house.

"He said sure," Contrucci said. So they asked for other changes, including the addition of a sun room, a second furnace, changes in windows and elevations, the addition of a balcony, and a slew of other changes.

The builder said, "Sure." Call them build to suit, made to order, or mass produced custom homes. But whatever they are, builders are moving to cater to the needs of people who point at a home and say "Something like that, but not exactly like that."

The question isn't will the builder make some changes — the question is how far is he willing to go?

APPARENTLY, as far as a builder has to go to make the sale, according to Ida Lucas, sales representative for S.R. Jacobson Development's Vintage Estates in Rochester

Hills where the Contruccis bought their home.

More buyers — especially upper end buyers — want a home that is uniquely their own, Lucas said. Home prices at Vintage Estates start from \$235,000.

Sometimes, changes are limited to changing facade or roof materials, moving and enlarging closets, or adding skylights. But other times buyers want extensive structural reworking — enlarging rooms, moving windows, changing elevations or even moving rooms, she said.

"You have to give people what they want," she said. "It takes a lot more time, but you have to provide detail, you have to be a custom builder."

"The end result (of these builder/buyer coordinated efforts) is a \$350,000 home with all the extras that has the attitude of a \$500,000 home," she said.

David Lewens, vice president of marketing at S.R. Jacobson Development Corp. in Birmingham, said builders have wrestled with the problems of giving home buyers what they want and still keeping the prices within reason.

S.R. Jacobson has developed a 15-page guide book sales representatives use to help people make their houses seem more like custom houses.

The process begins with a pre-production meeting, Lucas said. Prospective buyer and sales associate sit down to go over material and building options.

Lucas stressed that not everything buyers want is possible. "But if it's possible, we're willing to do it."

CUSTOMIZED, production hous-

ing isn't necessarily limited to upper end market.

The same principles can be applied to more moderately priced homes, according to Adriano Paciocco, president of Multi Building Inc. in Plymouth.

"Not all builders are doing customized production housing," he said. Because of the additional time, work and planning that is required, buyers generally find builders reluctant to customize production homes unless the homes are in the upper end of the market.

But just because only upper end builders are customizing homes, doesn't mean affordable home buyers are any less savvy, Paciocco said. "They can be just as demanding."

Paciocco said he is attempting to take the customized production housing principle and apply it to a more moderate market with his Maple Ridge Woods subdivision, a 51-home project of \$125,500 to \$136,000 homes being developed by Multi Building in Canton Township.

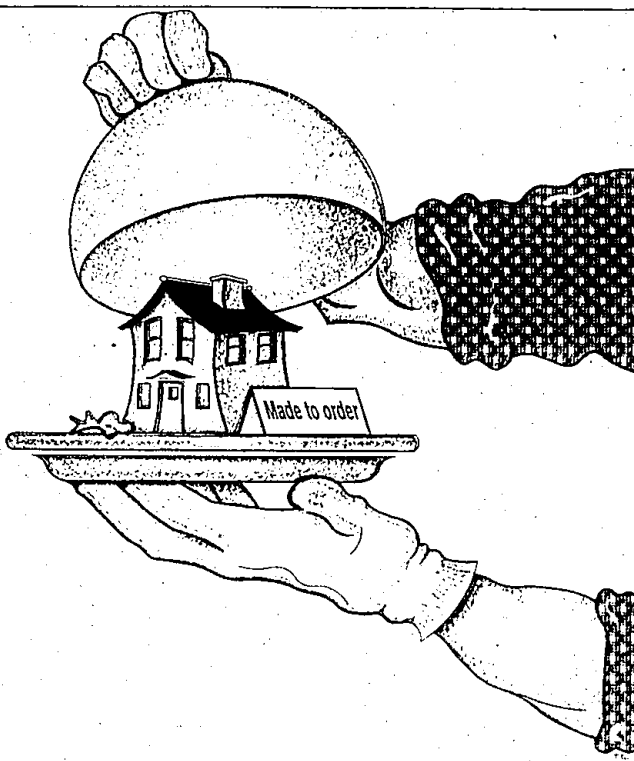
"It's been successful — half of the project is already pre-sold," he said.

Moving laundry rooms, adding additions, changing room partitions — many of the custom changes that are performed at the upper end can also be applied in the moderate market if the builder is willing to make the extra effort, Paciocco said.

"It's a little more work, but I think it's absolutely necessary," he said.

BUYERS HAVE become far more "street wise" within the last decade, Paciocco said. "People are moving around a lot and they're seeing more

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Today's buyers are more savvy about what they want and don't want in their home. So builders are offering the next best thing to a custom house — alterations to mass-produced houses. But modifications mean more

than just construction changes. For a builder, it also means training a sales staff that has some knowledge of what goes into designing and constructing a house.

Trucks roll; concrete strike settled

Some residential builders stymied by a strike of concrete transit drivers anticipate getting down to the business of building following settlement of the labor dispute late last week.

"It means we're going to go like hell," said James Bonadeo, a Plymouth builder and president of the Builders Association of Southeastern Michigan. "It took us three weeks to get a basement poured when normally it takes two days. A lot of builders are holding up basements."

Several builders, including B.B.C. Group and Holtzman & Silverman, both of Farmington Hills, and Bonadeo, reported that some of their projects had stalled during the six weeks the drivers were on strike.

Other builders, while not immediately affected, figured they would have been had the strike lasted into August.

The drivers, represented by Teamsters Local 247, settled on a pay increase of \$1.10 per hour over three years. They had been paid \$15.92 hourly.

"We got what we wanted on (health) insurance, we compromised on wages and got what we wanted on our pension," said Ben Mosqueda, business agent for Local 247.

THAT LOCAL generally represents drivers in Wayne and Washtenaw counties and pockets of Oakland County. Local 614, headquartered in Bloomfield Hills and which had settled earlier, represents other drivers in Oakland.

Whether specific builders were affected by the walkout of Local 247 generally was determined by where they were building.

Tom Sinelli, owner of Sinelli Concrete in Redford, and Chuck Guidobono, owner of Piedmont Concrete in Farmington Hills, both said they shut down and laid off several employees as a result of the strike.

"Very definitely, work will pick up for a period of time depending on the strength of the economy," Sinelli said. He added that some work he normally would have provided was gobbled up by drivers from Local 614 during the strike.

Guidobono said so much work was snatched up by other drivers during the strike that there's no backlog of jobs for his drivers.

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Group provides 'uniform voice'

Environmental consultants and contractors unite.

As environmental concerns continue to grow in importance in Michigan, the building and manufacturing industry, municipal governments and even private interests are more frequently turning toward environmental professionals for expertise and counsel.

Until now, these consultants and contractors have been a fragmented group, according to Mark Henne, interim vice chairperson of the newly formed Michigan Environmental Consultants and Contractors Association, which is holding its first meeting today in Lansing. He is president of a Lansing environmental consulting firm.

"We were formed because of a general lack of a uniform voice," Henne said.

Considering the growth in the industry and the far-reaching impact of new and changing regulations, Henne said it is surprising such an association wasn't formed before this.

"This idea is at least two years overdue."

Other considerations — such as information sharing, continuing education and professional and ethical standards — also prompted the formation of the association.

Henne said the association is not an advocacy group, but will fall on different sides of issues; sometimes siding with environmental advocacy groups and sometimes siding with industry and business.

In many issues, emotional concerns override reason and technical aspects, Henne said. "We'll be in the middle — our interests don't parallel conservation groups or industry."

The environmental consultant association's mission is to promote responsible improvement and protection of Michigan's environment and resources, he said.

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