

Building Scene

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Houses of tomorrow evolving today

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Meet George Jetson? Be George Jetson?

Probably not. The house of the year 2000 will not be an elevated space platform with malfunctioning transport tubes, runaway walkways, mechanical arms deftly (and sometimes harshly) inserting a pipe in your mouth.

According to Gopal Ahluwalia, director of research at the National Association of Home Builders, the home of tomorrow will closely resemble the house of today — on the outside.

But on the inside — to paraphrase tabloid television — that's a whole different story.

Ahluwalia said changes are being driven by the demands of home buyers — not by the desires of builders.

"The quickest way to go bankrupt in this business is for a builder to build what he thinks people want, and not what the people want."

Lifestyle changes that include people working more and working in their homes, demographics changes like the aging of baby boomers and an increased number of women in the work force; and the introduction of new technologies force builders to be more accommodating, he said.

TOMORROW'S HOME will be a two-story colonial, with a two-story foyer and nine-foot ceilings, instead of eight-foot ceilings, Ahluwalia said.

Conforming a trend of recent years, homes of the future will be built on smaller lots. But in keeping with present trends, homes will be slightly larger than today's average, Ahluwalia said.

Buyers may be willing to accept

smaller homes, but they must be better designed to accommodate features like two master bedrooms (one on each floor), family rooms, media rooms, exercise rooms or areas, large well-lit kitchens, two full baths with separate showers and tubs, and two half-baths, Ahluwalia said.

Homes of the future will also most likely include home offices, sunrooms and Florida rooms, Ahluwalia said. They will have two-car garages for the most part, but three-car garages will become increasingly more common, Ahluwalia said.

Builders will also continue to focus on their efforts on energy efficiency with more advanced furnaces, water heaters, windows, insulation, low-flush toilets and reduced-flow shower heads, Ahluwalia said.

RICHARD KOMER, president of Wineman & Komer Building Co. in Southfield, said much of the study's findings make sense.

Larger kitchens, home offices, better designed and open floor plans, media rooms — most of these predictions are well founded on marketing trends.

"Two-story colonials give people privacy — they can get away from the rest of the house, but it is also less expensive," he said. A colonial needs less floor space per square foot, less true ceiling height, and less wall space to make just a few of the economies as a multi-story structure.

But builders must be careful not to get caught in the trap of following trends.

"Not everyone is going to want a two-story colonial."

There are a growing number of older buyers without children who will want less space and single-floor living.

"That (the two-story home) may be good for the family, but the empty nesters are thinking ahead to when they won't want to climb stairs."

Komer said he believes homeowners will continue to press for more open floor plans, bigger rooms and better design in their homes.

Media rooms will become more important as people seek their entertainment at home.

"We know that is happening already — the marketing studies show people are spending less for entertainment."

Large kitchens make sense because they are the most common gathering places — which is surprising as more people eat out today

than ever before.

"The kitchen has become the focal point of the home," he said. Even though the kitchen is used less, people are looking for fully equipped kitchens.

"What it all comes down to is convenience," he said. Today's buyer is looking for convenience."

JOHN P. BOLLAN JR., vice president of Bollan Building Co. in Troy, said not everything the NAHB study is relevant to the southeastern Michigan market.

Michigan no longer responds directly to the overall housing market.

"It used to be things were tried out there (on the East and West Coast), and then they would make their way here," he said.

That's not necessarily the case now. The recession that precipitated the collapse of the East and West Coast housing market hasn't had nearly as great an impact in the Midwest, he said.

But southeastern Michigan's independence from other markets doesn't mean the NAHB's predictions are invalid.

Bollan said he can see a time when municipalities will permit higher densities, whether it will be before the year 2000 is another matter.

Other factors such as local patterns and weather will also affect Michigan housing.

"Sunrooms and Florida rooms, for example, are popular in the South and Southwest, but not here. Decks are far more popular, he said, but decks go unused for most of the year.

"Around here, people would trade a sunroom for a larger family room or great room," he said.

The great room — the evolution of a combined family and living room — has already taken a firm hold in this part of the country, he said.

People in Michigan seem to prefer

homes with a separate family room — for living in — and a living room — for doing nothing in.

"People around here just like that extra room — they grew up with it and don't want to lose it."

Bollan said he believes builders may cross over the threshold to a distinct front porch. Past trends have driven people from the front to the back of the home in search of privacy, he said, but he has noted an increased interest in home plans that include porches.

DANIEL BARTON, president of D&D Property Development in Canton, said he thinks the NAHB is wrong in one important aspect — the exterior.

The NAHB study predicts that home exteriors will resemble the home of today in most ways, but Barton is betting otherwise.

"I'm not just betting — I'm building."

Barton is building a "Victorian-style ranch," he said, adding that while the two sound contradictory, people will be impressed with the results.

"People who have seen the plans have been really impressed. Home buyers are beginning to tire of the contemporary and Tudor architecture that has become so prevalent in the last decade."

"I think we'll see a return to good and varied architecture."

Barton explained that he believes the status symbols of the last decade — big, opulence, excess — will be replaced by classical themes.

"If you want to impress someone, you won't take them home and show them your big house, you'll take him home and show them your Van Gogh."

Fine arts, classical music and culture will be the prestige symbols of the 1990s, he predicted.

Future demands new roles for builders

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Houses aren't the only things that will be changing by the year 2001 — builders will change, too.

Cost controls, competition and technology will place new demands on builders who will have to change the way they construct houses and do business, according to National Association of Home Builders director of research Gopal Ahluwalia.

Niche marketing, Ahluwalia said, will allow builders to improve their ability to target specific markets — both in building specifically for them and advertising for them.

Michael Tobin, president of Mike Building Co. in Farmington, said better marketing is a logical extension of what builders are already doing.

"That's no surprise," he said.

By building in a certain location and including certain features, builders are able to attract certain buyers. The real change will come in getting those buyers to move.

By using computers, direct selling, and computer studies that have information on what certain buyers are looking for, builders will be able to be even more specific, he said.

LABOR SHORTAGE and increased material costs, Ahluwalia said, will mean more manufactured components in houses of the future.

Manufactured components may have been a problem years ago when quality was suspect, but many of the bugs have been worked out of pre-manufactured components, he said.

Tobin said he believes the labor shortage may be less of a problem than material costs brought on by a lack of materials.

Lumber, the basic building material, fluctuates widely in price even now, he said. Manufactured components, constructed from particle boards and other composites permit builders to use more of the lumber that does exist.

"It makes good sense because it's more affordable, and it will become a necessity," he said.

Years ago, Tobin pointed out, carpenters built roof trusses on site. Today, trusses are pre-built by companies that do nothing else.

Tobin said it is less certain labor shortages will spur the use of manufactured components that would change house building from con-

struction to assembling.

"Right now, I can get all the labor I need," he said. But he agreed it's possible that a labor shortage could be brought on by a lack of new people going into the construction industry.

BUILDERS will become manufacturers of building products and components, Ahluwalia said, because it is a natural outgrowth of what they do now, and because it will reduce the turnaround time from idea to market.

Currently, builders are responding to the manufacturing industry by incorporating what products are produced as they come to market, he said. With increased marketing and a better knowledge of what buyers want, builders will begin making de-

mands for products that don't exist.

Eventually, large builders will become manufacturing facilities and become the innovators who produce products for themselves and other builders, rather than wait for the manufacturers to catch up.

"They as builders know what's needed and what's not."

Tobin disagreed, saying it will be the rare builder who becomes a manufacturer. "It's not necessarily — everything we need and more is already available somewhere."

The manufacturing industry that serves the building industry is quick to respond to the market's needs. In fact, much of the information build-

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