

COVER STORY

CUPOLA LOOK IS TOWERING ACHIEVEMENT

BY MARY KLEMIC
AT HOME EDITOR

Cupolas — those slender little towers on rooflofts — are genteel beacons of history and romance. And now they are signs of individual style as well.

Lawrence Zechmeister, owner of Zack's Workshope in St. Clair Shores, specializes in cupolas. He makes them by hand to fill custom orders, matching each cupola to the style of the structure to which it is attached and the client's ideas.

"It's a feeling of history on their own home," Zechmeister said. "It just says something about the individual person."

Zechmeister's cupolas feature a variety of window shapes ("I try to match the windows on the home"). Materials are woods from trees grown in Michigan.

Cupola roofs may be smooth, glistening copper, or consist of quaint wooden shingles. They may be topped with a choice of brass or copper vanes, including bonts, carriages, ducks that seem to glide in for landings, chubby pigs, majestic eagles, elegant horses and stately whales.

Lanterns activated by solar cells can be installed to coat the cupolas in a soft light at night. The structures are vented, and can be removed if a resident wants to transfer them to other houses or garages. Some cupolas are like little rooms and can be furnished.

A cupola can fit on any style house — ranch, Tudor, colonial, for example — of any age. It can be placed on a garage, a barn, a gazebo or a boathouse as well as on a residence. "I've put them on \$50,000 homes and million-dollar homes, and they never, never looked out of place."

Originally, a cupola was a small room, a form of a "widow's walk," where by tradition women could watch the harbor when they heard that ships were returning, and wait for their loved ones to come back from sea voyages. The structures also ventilated barns or houses.

Today homeowners have different reasons for wanting a cupola. The Finleys of Bloomfield Hills were looking for an anniversary gift.

"Every year we always buy something for the house," Genevieve Finley said. "We decided to support an artisan (last year)."

The couple decided to replace a 40-year-old cupola on their garage. Zechmeister made them an octagonal cupola with cedar shingles. It is blue

with white stars and is lit at night.

"People love it," Mrs. Finley said. "We had an open house New Year's, and eight people took his (Zechmeister's) card."

"I've always wanted one," said Kathleen Switalski of Northville, whose carriage house bears a cupola by Zechmeister with a "country doctor" vane. "These were the first I've ever seen in my life that I liked. They're just stunning ... I just love it."

Zechmeister is proud of the fact that rather than being mass produced, each of his cupolas is made by hand, a personalized approach that went into the original construction of many antiques.

"It's a real individual piece," he said. "No two cupolas I do will be the same."

Zechmeister's process involves going to the site and meeting with the clients.

"I run out to their home, look at the house and see exactly what they want. I sit down with the customer, pulling ideas out of their head."

The craftsman has handled some unusual requests, such as making cupolas for two 92-foot tall silos that were remodeled and converted into rooms. A person in the cupola can see geese fly by at eye level.

Cupola sizes vary, from about five feet to 14 feet across. The pine base octagon measuring 24 inches takes about 10 days to build; the cedar cupola takes longer.

"I'm not interested in slapping things together."

Prices, which include the vane, delivery and installation, range from about \$800 to \$2,800; most are \$1,500 to \$2,000.

Zechmeister got started in the cupola business about 14 years ago. He was working as a carpenter on a project for developer Morry Cohen when he was asked to rebuild a cupola on horse stables there that were constructed in the 1800s.

"(I thought) 'What the heck is a cupola?'"

Since then, the craftsman has become a "cupola-holic," understandably enthusiastic about the pieces. He thinks of them as his "calling cards," and has invited clients on neighborhood tours to see the completed cupolas.

"It's not just a job. They're like old friends ... I drive by to see them." People enjoy watching Zechmeister install the cupolas.

"I still get excited."



WILLIAM HANSEN

Looking up: Zechmeister adjusts the vane on a cupola. The craftsman can match the shape and style of a cupola to any structure.



Crowning touch: Cupolas by Lawrence Zechmeister give a personal touch to any structure, and bear a variety of vanes.

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On the cover: Lawrence Zechmeister makes cupolas by hand, giving customers a feel-