

COMING TO TERMS WITH CUSTOM



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: PHOTOS COURTESY OF ILEX, INC.

BY DENNIS HOCKMAN

WHEN DISCUSSING THE TOPIC OF HOUSING, homeowners, homebuilders, real estate agents, and architects all use the word *custom* to describe a certain level of quality and detail. Each group and each individual within each group may define the word differently depending on the audience and context. So when your neighbors announce that

they are moving to build a custom home, they just might be . . . or not. For many, building a custom home means adapting a basic house plan to suit specific needs, choosing finishes, appliances, flooring, cabinetry, countertops, fixtures, and other details. Certainly, deciding among various options is one level of customization, and what a benefit that fine builders throughout the

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE:

Custom woodwork and curvilinear railings are details characteristic of custom homes.



at your service

SOME OF THE LITTLE EXTRAS YOU MIGHT EXPECT FROM UPPER-END BUILDERS

BY JOHN BYRD

Time is money. So if you're cramped for the former and flush with the latter, you'll be glad the service side of high-end building is a burgeoning niche. Some of the specialized legwork offered by this rarefied breed include:

- **Procuring that Perfect Setting:** Tracts in the burbs or optimally located odd lots are still common enough, but suppose you want 5 or more acres overlooking the Potomac in an appreciably built-out community . . . select builders have evolved as discrete purveyors of properties not even on the market. These well-connected entrepreneurs locate contiguous properties, query owners, and perform feasibility studies. If all goes well, the lots are combined and the original homes are razed or integrated into a grand new scheme. This process can be time-consuming. Still, the company you want knew you were looking for the property before you did. That's why they're the best.
- **The Feasibility Study:** Large-scale homes begin with a site assessment, which evaluates technical and regulatory matters effecting site access, the foundation, waste disposal, utilities, environmental impact—as well as many aesthetic and lifestyle considerations. Because a comprehensive study often requires broad knowledge of real estate practice and building technologies, only a few companies offer authentically full-service management of a project—from land search to acquisition to design and construction. Those who do, provide a complete list of ancillary activities, a record of exceptionally performed assignments, and confidential references.
- **Assembling the Creative Team:** While affluent homeowners now insist on engaging a board certified architect, in-house professionals are no guarantee that the final design will be as unique and distinguished as a homeowner may hope. Estate developers pursue the cause of higher art homage by matching A-list architects (by portfolio and personality) to their client's tastes and passions. Interior designers, decorators, furniture makers, specialty fabricators, and others are, similarly, part of the builder's select talent pool.
- **Craftsmen, Artisans, Materials Procurement:** Cabinet makers, stone masons, artists, and craftsman endowed with rare or hard to find skills are often essential to providing the touches that distinguish a home. Matching everything from marble and grout to brick, wood, glass, or copper necessitates exhaustive searches of nationwide networks followed by a long process of trial and error. The goal is to create a convergence of textures and shades so subtle that only the most discerning can really deconstruct why just being there makes them feel so good.

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region are offering clients a range of options from which to choose. But choosing cabinetry and tweaking a floor plan here or there does not a custom project make.

In order to fully understand the nature of a custom home and the work required to design and build one, I spoke with several custom home builders and architects to get their takes on the topic. I first asked that each of them define "custom building" for me. The definitions were peppered with words and phrases like *detailed*, *time-consuming*, *hard work*, *clean slate*, *decision-making*, *one-of-a-kind*, and others equally as vague and elusive as the word *custom* itself. Yet listening to what these builders and architects had to say helped me begin to realize that custom building is less a thing you can define and more a process that is different for each home and client.

Still, there are certain qualities typical of most custom homes. Custom projects are often characterized by the involvement of numerous design and construction professionals as well as the participation of the client. According to architect Robert O'Brien, AIA, principal of O'Brien Design Consulting, "True custom homes are a collaboration among the builder, the client, the architect, and other professionals." These professionals work together to understand the specific needs of clients, giving them homes designed to fit their unique lifestyles.

"The key to building a custom home



Custom designs are often shaped to maximize views and vistas. PHOTO COURTESY OF ILEX, INC.

is developing an understanding of how you live," says O'Brien. Similarly, architect Joel Pearson, AIA, of Melville Thomas Architects notes that custom homes provide "solutions to spaces that enhance and reflect the specific lifestyle of the homeowner. These may include adjacency of spaces, size of rooms, views, logic, spatial flow, and room to window proportion."

Custom homebuilder Delbert Adams, President of Ilex, Inc., agrees. "A custom home is one that mirrors a homeowner's lifestyle and style. During the [custom design and construction] process, a client selects every knob, faucet, interior and exterior finish, etc. The final design is a product of the client—what they want for the size and the feel of the space.

"Unlike many new home construc-

tion projects," continues Adams, "where a percentage of the house is already designed, and then the design process is completed by selecting finishes, cabinetry, and hardware, a custom home is designed to be 100% unique, based around a client's specific needs and goals."

As an example, Josh Baker, President of Bowa Builders, points to the kitchen. "With most homes, the kitchen is located in the back of the house. A custom home design will consider the site and the client's needs. If the client intends to spend a lot of time in the kitchen and wants it to be a bright, sunny space, a custom home design will site the house on the lot and develop a floor plan that locates the kitchen where the sun will be most of the day."

Big picture design strategies like this

are important, but the details are also crucial to developing a design that fits with a client's lifestyle. According to Walt Rampata, with sales and marketing for Golden Builders, "Custom home building is allowing the client to customize the details to their lifestyle—providing clients with options, selections, and choices that will help make a home truly their own."

While all of this "understanding client needs and lifestyles" is the basis for any custom home, Pearson reminds us that it is the architect who first gives shape to the ideas. The details brought to light through the design "may include simple elements not commonly found in stock homes, [ones] that add value, character, and interest—thicker walls in special locations (for proportion); spatial transitions between rooms (rather than



PHOTO COURTESY OF VICTOR BOEHM BUILDING COMPANY. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNE GUMMERSON

A custom built home is enhanced by high-end materials and unique designs.

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“doorways”); deep window sills for seating or built-ins; window sizes, groupings, and locations that actually relate to furniture placement, activity, and views.”

Building a custom home is about sweating both the big stuff and the small stuff—it is about creating a unique, one-of-a-kind home that enhances the way people

live but, also, according to Baker, considers the conditions of a specific site. “The unique program takes advantage of all the site allows.” Architects O’Brien and Pearson concur. A custom home fits into a site, maximizing views and vistas, taking advantage of unique site opportunities and, strangely enough, even restrictions.

If the design of a custom home is focused on the needs of the client and the conditions of the site, the process, accord-



ing to Rampata, "is overwhelmingly centered on customer service, making sure that all of the details are cared for, accounted for, and followed up on." But this high level of customer service and attention to detail "requires much more involvement (by the builder and the client)."

This collaboration between client and builder is not without its challenges. According to Adams, "It is a lot of work. Clients need to be good decision makers. They need to be able to look at the options, make decisions, and move forward—otherwise the project will get stalled."

In order to help keep the project on track, custom builders establish well-defined schedules and hold regular meetings with key professionals and the client to make sure both the schedule and budget are in line. The process from design through finished home is one of evolution. And the process is a long one—by all accounts the design stage can take anywhere from 6 months to a year and the construction process typically adds another 9 months to 1½ years depending on the size and complexity of the home. Throughout both the design and construction phases, the

custom home client will typically make thousands of decisions about both the big picture and the fine details. As Rampata summarizes, the process begins with merely a concept from the client—a concept that is brought to life by filling in the details.

Custom builder Larry Boehm, President of Victor Boehm Building Company, likens the custom building process to a marriage. "The custom builder needs to understand how clients will live in their most intimate spaces. We will ask, at times, very personal questions about likes and dislikes, habits, lifestyles, etc. And then the client will need to make decisions."

According to Adams, "People underestimate the number of decisions they will need to make. For a typical home there will easily be over 1,000 decisions to be made about finishes, hardware, tile, flooring, etc. On the subject of hardwood flooring, for example, there might be 20 or more decisions that need to be made. The architect and builder will give advice, but the ultimate decision is up to the client."

If you find the long process of design and decision making a bit daunting, understand that building a custom



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VICTOR BOEHM BUILDING COMPANY. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNE GUNNERSON

Elaborate hand-wrought moldings and carvings are typical of traditionally-styled custom homes.



A contemporary scheme using windows, the fireplace, and cutting edge art to create a focal point.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOWA BUILDERS, INC.

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home is something most people do only once. As Boehm suggests, "Because building a custom home is not an inexpensive venture, the clients deserve to be involved as much as they would like. The more time spent planning, pricing, and scheduling the better."

Baker adds, "For builders, each home is unique, but so is each client. So the process needs to be adapted to suit individual needs." In general though, every custom home project begins by evaluating the property or helping clients locate a property. According to architect

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This custom solution includes a screened porch running along the backside of the house connecting interior rooms and allowing activities to spill outside. Architecture by Melville Thomas Architects.

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Jay Brown, principal of Levin/Brown & Associates, "When initiating work of a custom residence, we begin with a comprehensive review of the site, identifying opportunities and constraints for development. These include program elements such as pools, tennis courts, putting greens, water features, play yards, etc. At the same time, we consider solar orientation, views, topography, and zoning constraints." Architects and builders will study the property to learn about zoning, environmental, septic, well, and other restrictions to determine what can and cannot be built.

After studying the site, initial design

begins. An architect will itemize goals and needs of clients and consider how those needs will change over time. According to O'Brien, "This phase is the back of the envelope phase. Clients will provide a lot of input about their needs and desires, personalities, styles, and lifestyles. Builders and architects will offer advice and suggestions to help clients narrow the options. Often, several schemes will be developed to help the client hone in on which direction works best."

Brown adds that during this initial phase, "We discuss the spaces required; their relationship to one another; the individual requirements for each space including furniture, art, lighting, technology, and the interior and exterior aesthetic the client is trying to achieve. With this information in hand, we work to cre-



RIGHT AND OPPOSITE PAGE: Set into the hillside, this "L-shaped" home is custom designed with plenty of windows, taking advantage of beautiful valley views. Architecture by O'Brien Design

ate a living environment that takes maximum advantage of the site and achieves all of the owners' goals for their living environment."

Using the schematic design, architects and builders work from the general to the specific, gradually developing floor plans, the look, and the budget. Adams notes that the budgets developed during this stage are relative to the request. "After the initial design phase, a budget will be established to determine whether the project is in sync with a client's expectations. Then the budget is dissected to determine how much is allowable for each element of the home. During design development, budgets become firmer, and clients are constantly kept apprised of expenses relative to the design." As Boehm puts it, "The budget starts general and then becomes more specific. Once a general budget is reached, we make allowances and then selections within those allowances."

As an aside, Baker notes that, "All costs, fees, profits, etc. should be accounted for. Most custom home clients are financially successful and savvy about money, so they expect to see where their money goes. They know that builders are in business to turn a profit but also expect



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A custom home can be constructed of various elements to appear as if the structure has evolved over time.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GOLDEN BUILDERS, INC.

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to understand how the profit margin fits into the bottom line."

To culminate this design development and budget refining stage, O'Brien notes that, "the architect works to hone in on the details of the project until the client is satisfied, and then construction documents are produced for the builder." Using these documents, the builder works with the client through a series of approval and selection processes. "Throughout construction, the builder holds regular meetings with the client to discuss budget and schedule," says Boehm.

Although the custom building process is time consuming, the benefits are great. As architect and interior designer Patrick Sutton, AIA, says, "A custom home is like a custom made suit. It is a home that is tailored to fit only you. It is something that is made to suit your sense of style, be appropriate to the circumstances it is made for, fit your budget, look great, and be extremely comfortable in a way that something off the shelf just can't do."

This "fit" that can be achieved through a custom home is important for people who draw relationship between space and lifestyle. With a custom home, "you don't have to put up with spaces that are incongruous with your needs," says Adams. "The design fits the needs, and the spaces match your lifestyle." For example, one current trend in home-

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building is toward large luxurious bathrooms, which are great for people who look to the bath as sanctuary and escape. "But for some, bathing is just part of a daily routine," says Adams, "and relatively unimportant." So a big expensive bathroom might be wasted space, which is why lifestyle needs to be taken into account—developing each space so it works best for the homeowner.

"Custom homes are designed to nurture and support the way people live," says Baker. And strangely enough, designing custom homes suited to the way you live can mean you actually save money—at least in part. Because most custom home clients are kept apprised of the budget, they can make decisions about expenses that can save money on a bathroom, for example, and divert those funds to smart wiring for a home office. "An open book policy helps clients see how their decisions affect the outcome and budget," says Baker.

Even though custom building is typically more expensive than buying a production built home, "There is a misconception that only the super rich can afford to build a custom home," says O'Brien. Considering this notion, Pearson offers a final thought, "The word custom doesn't have to be associated with 'fancy' or 'expensive.' Custom can mean simple elements, so long as the solutions are specific to enhancing lifestyle." ♦

Dennis Hockman is the Editor of ChesapeakeHome.

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