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DREAM BIG

... BUT ASK A FEW QUESTIONS BEFORE GETTING STARTED

What exactly does the term "dream house" mean? Doesn't everyone have a personal vision of an ideal home? Would two dream homes have anything in common beyond the roof, walls, and plumbing?

Mike Owings, of Owings Brothers Construction in Eldersburg, likes to interview potential clients, asking them to do their homework before the first meeting.

Typically, his clients list the kitchen, master bathroom, and family room as the most important areas to undertake. To hone the plan-and to better understand his clients-Owings asks that they bring a list of the top 10 dreams for their house. By the end of that meeting, he knows not only his clients' wishes, but also can see how to spread out the costs.

"If they have always wanted a stone house, we know that a large portion of the budget will go to the exterior, as stone is expensive," Owings says. Similarly, for the technology minded client, a less costly material such as shingle or wood siding could be used on the outside, saving money for interior gadgets.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIMOTHY JACOBSON**



Mike Owings (left) of Owings Brothers Construction likes to interview potential clients before the work begins. "For a dream house, clients really think out of the box," says Owings. Pictured with Owings are homeowners Ruth and Tom Pestorius, living (in) their dream (home).



"It's a lot like a marriage," says Douglas Monsein of the Douglas Construction Group. "There will be days when we will love each other and days when we won't." The end result, of course, is a home loved by both the builder and homeowner

Douglas Monsein, chairman of the Bethesda-based Douglas Construction Group, stresses the importance of communication. "Whether you are building a dream home or a starter house, there must be chemistry between the builder, the architect, and the clients," he says. "It's a lot like a marriage. There will be days when we will love each other and days when we won't, so we have to know going into the project that, overall, we will work well as a team."

Monsein spends as much time in the get-to-know-you interview as possible before committing to any project. "When I interview a potential client, I like to spend a good deal of time, sometimes hours, looking through magazines together, finding out what they like, and why," he says. "Then we hire each other. But there must be a relationship there."

Douglas Construction mostly renovates or replaces houses in Potomac, as well as in Chevy

Chase and Bethesda. Some of these jobs are "spec houses"-homes he buys and renovates to his liking in order to sell. Others are "modified spec," or houses that he renovates to a point and then sells, leaving decisions about finishing touches to the buyer. One-third of his business is custom homes.

With any project, the process is essentially the same: The owner makes decisions - based on dreams, budget, or both - and the builder manages the execution.

Again, Monsein stresses the importance of the relationship. "Once we start building, the construction part is easy," he says. Walls have to be straight, water must flow down, wiring must meet code. The intangibles are what can present problems, and there the builder must keep things running smoothly.

"We are in the position of managing the owners' expectations and, sometimes, their emotions," he says. "If the owner walks in one day and realizes the entire layout

of a room is wrong, and that a wall has to come down, we have to make that happen, and make that change as pleasant as possible."

DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS

"For a dream house, clients really think out of the box," Owings says. "They are not just looking to improve on what they have. They want the very best cabinetry, the latest in technology, the custom finishes in tile, mill-work, and trim. If they love to cook, they want the gourmet kitchen, customized to fit their wishes."

He continues, "What makes the average 'average' is the lack of detail. What makes the dream house 'dreamy' is the personally chosen, custom details found throughout the house."

In Chevy Chase, where property sizes are limited, builder Douglas Monsein finds clients yearning to make the most of the space they have. While many clients opt to tear down old houses to build large ones on not-so-large lots, Monsein finds his clients today replacing "size" with "charm" on their priority lists. "For years, everyone wanted huge living rooms and master suites and two-story great rooms; now they would rather spend their money on quality and character," he says.

Victor Boehm, of the Timonium-based Victor Boehm Building Company, agrees. In the high-end renovation projects his 30-year-old company undertakes throughout northern Baltimore City and Baltimore County, Boehm is no longer seeing requests for large, expansive spaces. "Instead," he says, "clients want spaces that are little jewel boxes, where the skills and talents of carpenters, ornamental ironworkers, and other craftsmen can be on display."

He adds, 'Today, homeowners are thinking, 'I want it done right,' not, 'I want it done fast.'" Like the homeowners who asked Boehm to accompany them to a half dozen different stone yards where they could look over more than 100 slabs of stone for their newly remodeled kitchen. They eventually picked a particular shade of stone known as "Blue Bahia" that is quarried off the coast of Brazil by scuba divers only six months of the year.

WRITING ON THE WALLS

Douglas Monsein has discovered that his clients are also looking for fun yet practical spaces for their children. 'We have created a number of 'arts and crafts rooms,' off the kitchen or off the basement club room, where little ones can be as creative as they like," he says. These rooms are complete with washable vinyl tile floors, walls covered with special wipe-off paints, and storage cubbies galore.

For the slightly older set, homework rooms have become popular, especially with parents who are unwilling to put computers in their children's bedrooms. "The homework room is easy to create," Monsein says. 'just make a guest room a little smaller, or find a nook in the upstairs hallway. Give it a countertop, cabinets above and file space below, and you've got a homework room."

Of course, as baby boomers get older, they're asking for age-appropriate features for themselves as well, including homes with elevators, says Denise Hanna, director of sales and marketing for Dale Thompson Builders, based in Columbia. It's not all about practicality, though, Hanna adds. Many "dream-home owners" are also request-



Says Deni Tabor of Ashley Homes: "The dream can be knowing what works for you. What makes a dream house is that the house is uniquely yours." Pictured with Deni is her husband and business partner, Neil.

ing such luxury features as a wet bar in the master bedroom or a fireplace in the master bath.

VACATION DREAMING

Down on the Eastern Shore, where many dream homes are vacation homes, personal hobbies and the need for a place to unwind rule the design. "The term 'dream house' means something different to everyone," says Dirck Bartlett, sales manager for Easton's Ilex Construction Group.

"Many of our clients who have a second home have certain interests, and they dedicate a part of their home to that hobby," Bartlett says.

In Baltimore, Ashley Custom Homes also creates spaces that reflect its clients' passions, says chief operating officer Deni Tabor.

These include such dreamy add-ons as the Ping-Pong room for an avid player whose own father had once coached Olympic-level Ping Ponger players; the gourmet kitchen for the cook who requested not one, not two, but three kitchen islands, as well as restaurant-style built-in seating; and the artist who needed varying ceiling heights in different parts of the house in order to accommodate her oil paintings, some of which are 18 to 20 feet high.

For Ilex's many celebrity clients, privacy is a top priority. Such bells and whistles as home theaters and gyms have been included not just for fun, but as a necessity. "For our professional athletes and other well-known clients, going to a movie or to the gym can be impossible," Bartlett says. "For them, slipping with friends into the home theater is the closest they can get to a night out at the movies."

HOMES GETTING SMARTER

In western Maryland, whether a homeowner wants a vacation place near Deep Creek Lake or a year-round house, "smart homes" are on many people's wish list, says Clayton Varner, technology director of Humberson Homes in McHenry.

Automatic blinds that raise when you walk into a room (and lower when you leave); home theaters that feature 106-inch screens and 7.1 surround sound systems (the same you find in an actual movie theater); remote systems with touch screens that let you choose an activity and then automatically set up your equipment; and (Varner's favorite request) individual temperature controls for the shower, are making today's dream homes something the Jetsons could only have, well dreamed of.

But "smart homes" also extend to energy efficiency, adds Sandi Denny, a sales consultant for Tri County Builders in southern Maryland. "People may want a dream home, but they also want cheaper energy bills," says Denny. To that end, Tri County offers geothermal (also known as geoexchange) heating and cooling systems. In winter, the process works by

drawing warmth from the earth through a series of pipes installed beneath the ground. A water solution which circulates through the pipes carries the earth's natural warmth to a heat pump inside the home. In the summer, the process is reversed, with heat being extracted from air inside the house and transferred to the earth by way of the ground pipes.

ESCAPE ROUTE

And then there are the clients who just want to get away from it all. "We hear so often clients telling us that they want to escape the busy pace of their daily lives and make their home a sanctuary, someplace they can completely unwind," says Ilex's Bartlett. "

We've built completely high-end, brand-new beach houses and farmhouses that look 100 years old," says Bartlett. "People will spend tremendous amounts of money for a simple house that feels to them like a favorite old shoe."

That said, there are also the clients for whom the dream house is the place to let fantasy run wild. One Baltimore Countycouple installed a spiral staircase in the two-story foyer of their contemporary home. The staircase winds around a fish tank, also two stories tall, filled with exotic marine species. Another client had Ilex build a garage large enough to hold his 47 collectible automobiles on his sprawling Baltimore County property. The garage features a cantilevered door which runs nearly the entire width of the structure.

Little is beyond the talents of the custom builder, Bartlett assures. Like Chevy Chase builder Monsein, Bartlett believes that the client relationship is everything. "Once we commit to a client, we do whatever we can to make it happen for them," he says.

Adds Ashley Homes' Deni Tabor, "Many homeowners have no idea they can actually get some of the things they ask for."

Some homeowners may also be surprised to find that they don't need an unlimited budget to have their dream house. "We can do drop-dead gorgeous - like the home that has rosewood floors throughout," says Tabor, "or we can create a home for a family with a more modest budget who know what they looking for but just haven't been able to find it.

For some homeowners, their dream house is simply a home that is more practical and works right for their family, says Tabor.

"The dream can be knowing what works for you," Tabor says. "What makes a house a dream house is that the house is uniquely yours."