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® NOVEMBER 2010
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NICHE AND CUSTOM DESIGNS, SUCH AS THIS COMPLETELY REIMAGINED LIFEGUARD TOWER, CAN MAKE A GREAT CALLING CARD FOR A BUILDER. PHOTO COURTESY OF LAZAR DESIGN/BUILD | LAURA HILL.



NICHED

INTO A CORNER?



Building a niche home has its advantages...
and disadvantages

DANIEL SAVICKAS

In the midst of the worst homebuying market on record, there are still homeowners who want to build their dream niche home. Yet building a niche home for them—sometimes on spec—can be a dangerous investment and pose many problems. And as many builders are discovering, finding the perfect buyer for a unique niche home can be tough.

Just ask Steve Lazar, of Lazar Build/Design. He was the designer and builder of an unique high-end home in Hermosa Beach, CA, that wrapped up construction late last year.

When Lazar's client contacted him about tearing down a small duplex and designing something in its place, she was clear she wanted Lazar to build something that would make a statement in the area.

The result was a home designed to mimic the look and feel of lifeguard towers, which are an iconic visual of the area. The 3,600-square-foot house features enough room to park seven cars within spitting distance of the beach, a truly unheard of commodity on Hermosa Beach. The home also features 1,400 square feet of open space, 1,200 of which makes up a rooftop deck with a guest suite.

The house couldn't have turned out any better, but the timing couldn't have been worse. Built as a spec home, Lazar's customer set the price tag on the four-bedroom, three-bath, two-half-bath home at \$5 million. The home is currently marked down to \$3.9 million.

"The dirt value in the neighborhood is \$1.9 million," Lazar says. "It's almost at replacement cost. So now she's stuck with a remarkable home with a big price tag she can't sell it for."

The home has had some interest, but Lazar thinks that the market is still going to get worse. So while the home does have some potential buyers, they seem to be waiting for the cost to come down even more.

While the lifeguard-tower-inspired design hasn't secured any buyers, it has scored Lazar more clients who were impressed with the unique design.



WHILE THE LIFEGUARD TOWER HAS YET TO NAB A BUYER IT HAS SCORED THE DESIGNER, STEVE LAZAR, MORE CLIENTS IMPRESSED WITH ITS DESIGN. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAZAR DESIGN/BUILD.

"The design brought me a lot of attention," Lazar said. "There's always someone out there that wants a building with a very discernable style."

WHEN STYLES CHANGE? REMODEL

Potential homebuyers looking for a discernable style have tastes that change with time. In the past that would mean more new homes being built, Lazar said, but now he said customers who hired him in the past to build a niche home are now having those homes remodeled instead of building new ones.

"I have a lot of clients who are remodeling because they built in a neighborhood they loved and they don't want to leave or start on a new mortgage in this economy," Lazar said. "I have clients calling me in to do elaborate remodels; things that basically change the entire look and feel of the house."

Four years ago new construction made up all of Lazar's work; these days 50% of his work is in the form of custom remodels.

Debbie Wiener, owner of Designing

Solutions and Slobproof.com—a custom, stain-proof line of furniture—is familiar with working to turn a custom home into an even more custom niche home.

Wiener's clients took a four-bedroom, five-and-a-half-bathroom home in the suburbs of Washington, DC, and turned it into the ultimate niche home for a family with active kids.

With two boys in middle school, Wiener's client not only wanted all of the furniture to be stain-proof and durable, they also wanted the 5,000-square-foot home to be basically turned into a giant playroom for their kids.

The family room, which has tall vaulted ceilings, was converted into a basketball court. The walls surrounding the court were covered with various climbing holds to turn them into a climbing wall. The living room was converted into a game room, and the tennis court out back was turned into a skateboard park.

The key for Wiener's clients was finding a home with the right bones, since finding exactly what they were looking for wasn't really an option. So what was important to them was finding a home that had enough room to allow them to remodel it into their dream house.



TAKING EXISTING HOMES AND RENOVATING INTO NICHE HOMES IS A TREND MANY BUILDERS ARE EXPLOITING. [ABOVE] A DRAB FAMILY ROOM IN THIS PROJECT WAS TRANSFORMED INTO AN INSIDE BASKETBALL COURT, WHILE [RIGHT] THE OUTDOOR TENNIS COURTS WERE RENOVATED INTO A MINI SKATE PARK. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DESIGNING SOLUTIONS/SLOBPROOF.COM.



ONE MAN'S CEILING IS ANOTHER MAN'S FLOOR

Sometimes the process of gutting a home in an attempt to create someone's dream home offers a second party the opportunity to create a unique home.

This was the idea behind the Austin company Reclaimed Space. Started by Tracen Gardner and Kimber Reed, the company builds one-of-a-kind modern cabins out of reclaimed materials.

After 10 years of saving different woods from various deconstruction projects and remodels, Gardner found himself thinking, "If I just keep enough of these pieces, I could build an entire cabin."

So that's what he did. Along the way he bought and deconstructed old barns, the latest a 6,000-square-foot barn.

The cabins, which are made from 80- to 140-year-old wood, are built in a 7,000-square-foot factory. The insulation is provided from recycled denim.

"It's like putting petrified wood into these cabins," Gardner said.

With a crew of 10 to 15 workers, Gardner said the cabins are typically built in six to eight weeks. Once the cabin walls are built, they are raised and then loaded onto the back of a flatbed truck.

"We've shipped two to Los Angeles," Gardner said.

Once at the site, Gardner said the homes can be completely hooked up and move-in ready in three days.

Reclaimed Space has built seven cabins so far at \$115 to \$130/square foot. The smallest was 336 square feet and the largest was composed of three structures to add up to 1,240 square feet. Last year Reclaimed Space won an award from the EPA for its Lifecycle Building Challenge.

While no one is sure what is in store for 2011, signs show an increasing number of affluent customers are making plans to build or buy in the near future. If these predictions hold true, this could be enough to jump-start the niche home market. **B**



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