

Custom Home Building Secrets

Michael McGuffie

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Table of Contents

Who Moved My Cheese!	1
Who Should I Hire First, The Architect Or The Builder?	3
Custom Or Production Builder?	6
Is My Home Builder Ripping Me Off With Change Orders?	8
Building A New Custom Home Is Fun!.....	10
What Is A Custom Home Builder?	12
How To Select A Custom Home Builder?	13
Do You Want The Biggest Custom Home Builder Or The Best?	16
How Much Do You Charge Per Square Foot?	17
Which Is Better - A Cost Plus Or Fixed Price Contract?	18
How To Get Your Best Deal?	20
Is Your Builder Listening To You?	23
Project Status Reports.....	24
Should I Hire A New Builder That's Less Expensive Or An Experienced Builder That Costs More?	26
Does Your Builder Offer A Pre Drywall Walk-Thru?	28
Why the Regal Team?.....	29
The Team Approach	31
The Right Realtor Can Be Your Best Friend!	32
Why Don't They Build Homes In Orlando That Look Like The Ones Up North?	33

Michael McGuffie

Should I Build A Home With Frame Or Concrete Block Construction?	35
Who Designs The Cabinets For Custom Homes, The Architect Or The Cabinet Company?	37
Save Time & Money On Plan Designs!	38
Are Two Story Homes Less Expensive To Build Than A One Story?	39
Should I Design My Home With The Master Bedroom On the 1st Or 2nd Floor?	40
Designing The Layout Of Your Master Suite	41
Shower Door In Master Bathroom Or Not?	42
A Tub In The Master Bath Or Not?	43
Flat Roof Decks	44
Bonus Room Over The Garage Challenge	46
What Size Garage Will I Need For My Home?	49
What's a Florida Basement And Do I Need One?	50
Don't Forget Electrical Outlets For Holiday and Landscape Lighting	51
Pocket Doors, Homeowners Love Them But Why Do Builders Hate Them?	52
What Happened To The Coat Closet In My Florida Home?	54
Make All Your Selections Before Your Start Building	55
Where To Spend Your Money	57
Design Trends	58
What Do Flooring Materials Cost?	60
Hardwood Flooring Placement	61
What Size Lot Should I Buy?	62

Custom Home Building Secrets

Should I Buy A Corner Lot?	64
Buying A Building Lot, 5 Things To Consider	65
5 More Things To Consider Before Buying A Building Lot	67
What Orientation To The Sun Is Best For My Home?	69
Should I Save The Trees On My Building Lot?	71
Quality, It Has To Be Built In, Not Inspected Into A Home	73
Can I Use My Own Subcontractors Or Suppliers?	75
Should I Get Propane Or Electric?	77
Insulation, What I Recommend	78
Spray Foam Insulation	79
Solar Powered Attic Fans	81
Should I Upgrade To Energy Efficient Windows?	82
New Space Age Exterior Wall Material!	84
Upgrade Your AC System To Save \$\$\$\$	86
What Type of Front Door Should I Select?	87
Gutters Please!	90
Heating Your Master Bathroom	92
Toilet Bidet	94
Steam Shower	95
Open Or Closed Roof Valley?	96
Should My Home Have A Circular Driveway?	97
Should I Choose A Concrete Drive and Walkway Or Pavers?	98
Sound Insulation For Your New Home	100

Michael McGuffie

Do I Need A Pool Heater?	102
Exterior Paint That Lasts A Lifetime!	103
Cracks In Concrete	104
Lightning Protection.....	106
Whole House Electrical Surge From Lightning Strikes, What You May Be Doing To Encourage Them	108
Fabulous Lanais!	109
How Do I Prevent My Ceramic Tile Floors From Cracking?.....	112
Should I Hang Wallpaper In The Bathroom?.....	113
Shallow Well Irrigation For Your Landscaping	114
What Issues Keep Home Builders Awake At Night?.....	115
What Type Of Mulch Is Best?.....	121
When Can I Move Into My New Home?	122
Maintaining Your Home.....	124
Home Security.....	130
Pool Filter Maintenance.....	132
Animals In Your attic.....	133
Keep An Eye On Your Grass	136
Air Conditioner Filters	137
Customer Care Procedure.....	138

Who Moved My Cheese!

What are your expectations?

Before you decide to build a new home or remodel it's important to check in with yourself and ask, "What are my expectations and are they reasonable"?

Like you, I'm a consumer too. I travel, eat at great restaurants and occasionally indulge in the finer things in life. On the other hand, I'm not going to McDonald's and expecting the Seasons 52 experience. Even if I visit a "top shelf" restaurant, paying big bucks, I know before I go that the experience is not going to be perfect.

It's really amazing when you buy a new car for \$50,000 and you pick it up at the dealership, it's almost perfect! One would think if you are paying \$1,000,000 for a new custom built home, that home would be close to perfect too! Unfortunately, if that's your expectation, you are most likely going to be disappointed.

A new car is just one of a thousand just like it. They created a prototype, refined it multiple times and then put it into production, refining as they receive feedback from the market place. It's being manufactured by people and robots that do the same exact thing every day in a climate controlled environment.

A new custom built home "IS A PROTOTYPE". It's never been built before. Even if you are building a plan that is a duplicate of another home you have viewed before, it's really not the same. The lot is different and so are the components. Pieces and parts from all over the world are being assembled on site, rain or shine. Changes to the prototype are being adjusted on a daily basis to meet site conditions. A workman constructing your home today was building something entirely different last week.

Building a custom home is one of the largest, on site, hand crafted products. Frankly, it's not going to be perfect. "If

Michael McGuffie

perfection is your expectation, then building a custom built home is going to be a difficult and disappointing undertaking."

Who Should I Hire First, The Architect Or The Builder?

That's a question many home buyers ask before they embark on the home building process. "We have our building lot, now what"?

Over my 30+ years of building homes I've watched Clients proceed in both directions with quite different results. I'll start with the Client that hires the Architect or Plan Designer first.

Architect First:

- The problem with this approach is that the Client is left to deal with the Architect without feedback from a Builder.
- The Architect has no idea how much the home he is designing will cost. Most times, he provides a cost per SF (square foot) of living area that has little basis in actual market pricing.
- Most Architects are hired to design commercial buildings and design very few residential homes. If that's the case, the Client's home will have more of a commercial building feel. If you decide to hire the Architect first, make sure he is a "Residential Architect".
- Architects are artists and design really cool features but have no idea how much these exciting details will actually cost or practically work. Redesigning after the plans are completed when the Client discovers they can't afford them or the Builder finds the details impractical can really be expensive.
- The Architect isn't motivated to control the final building cost. He's excited to see his cool design get built.

Even if the Client asks a few Builders for check prices along the designing process, the Builders are motivated to

provide the lowest quote possible as they know from experience that:

- Providing a more realistic estimate will eliminate them from consideration.
- There isn't enough information to provide accurate pricing.
- Any price they provide is submitted without an obligation to be accurate.

Periodic review meetings with the client to review plans take months and months as the home gets larger and larger. Eventually the plans are completed and submitted to multiple Builders only to find out they can't afford the mansion they spent tens of thousands of dollars designing.

I can't tell you how many times I've seen this happen over my building career. The plans end up being thrown in the trash! Submitting the plans to multiple Builders at this point isn't going to help you discover design flaws either. Can you imagine submitting the plans that you worked on for a year, spent thousands designing and are so proud to display, and one of the Builders telling you there are design flaws that will require a re-draw? The Builder doesn't want to be eliminated from the project so he says nothing and builds it as drawn or tells you during construction when it will cost even more to fix it.

Builder First:

Custom Home Builders have a team of professionals that they work with every day. Suppliers, Subcontractors, Interior Designers, Interior Architects, Landscape Architects and Residential Designers or Residential Architects. They are used to coordinating experts from entirely different fields.

That's important, as you want to hire someone who can bring together as many experts as possible to your custom home project. All these specialists see your home from a different perspective and Clients need an advocate that can manage this team. A good Builder will engage his team early

in the design process to avoid potential problems in the future. As soon as a Builder expects a team member to see an issue that is beyond their normal thinking, there is a problem. Expecting a painter to think "waterproofing", a framer to think "attic air flow" or a roofer to think "attic ventilation", there is going to be an issue. THE BUILDER IS THE ONLY TEAM MEMBER THAT SEES THE ENTIRE PICTURE. That's why hiring an experienced Builder is so vital. He knows from years of problem solving what to look for. He knows because it's "bit him in the butt" before!

Custom Or Production Builder?

Ok, here is a test question to see if we are both on the same page, "What type of restaurant do you like to eat at with your family? Do you frequent national chain restaurants or do you seek out the hard-to-find mom and pop places"?

If you are like me, you will hunt to find special restaurants owned by a family where the owner is right there watching over things. The spouse is there too and the kids are the servers. The owner greets you at the door and stops by your table to see if you've been treated right. Somehow, the food always tastes better and you like being treated as though being there matters. They know you by name after a few visits and what you ordered the last time you stopped in. If you are like me, you feel the love.

I live on the SW side of "O Town" so I'll mention a few restaurants I frequent so you get my point. Taquitos Jalisco, Christini's, Le Cocoa Vin, Enzo's On The Lake, Bonsai Sushi, Little Saigon, Brazas Chicken and Magic Wok. All of these restaurants are exceptional!

On the other hand, you can eat at a national chain restaurant. The food and service is consistent but not exceptional. You take home your left over's and the next day when you take your leftovers out to eat lunch, there's sludge on the bottom of the container or you find out they use pink slime to make their chicken pieces and you're feeding that to your kids!

The difference: one has a stake in the community and the other doesn't. One is beholden to a bunch of stockholders distributed throughout the world and the other depends upon your support to feed his kids. At the family restaurant you, the customer, are his life's blood. The chain food restaurant has to meet profit projections set by corporate headquarters in another city.

Now that I've made my point, the same is true for Production vs. Custom Builders. The difference, a huge

corporation builds thousands of homes throughout the country versus a small Custom Home Building Company that builds a handful of homes to feed his family and put a few bucks away for his kid's college fund and personal retirement. One hires people that are only as good as the last home they delivered and the other puts his heart into each home that he builds. One has a team of suppliers and subcontractors that the builder has created a relationship with over the years versus the other that hires the lowest bidder to build your dream home.

Perhaps buying a production home was all you could afford for your first starter home but now you've saved your hard earned money and are ready for a New Custom Home, Renovation or Addition.

I can always tell when I first meet Clients that had a previous production home building experience. They walk into our first meeting like they have two six-shooters mounted on both hips, one eye squinted closed and extra ammunition belts strapped across their chests. It looks like something out of an old western movie. They are loaded for bear! Their questions are pointed with a determination not to be ripped off again. They felt like they had been squeezed like a loaf of Wonder Bread after their last home building experience. I spend the next several meetings and sometimes the entire time building their home getting them to trust me.

Ok, now it's your turn to decide, do you want your home being built by subcontractors and suppliers that were the lowest bid or by a team of professionals that have been working together for years.

Is My Home Builder Ripping Me Off With Change Orders?

Most Homeowners are under the impression that Builders love Change Orders! In fact, people say that's where the Builders make all their money!

Frankly, that's far from the truth. With Custom Home Building, Change Orders slow up the construction process and lead to disagreements with the Homeowners. Imagine that the Builder has the next two weeks tightly scheduled and you tell him you've changed your mind regarding those upgraded windows and the lead time for delivery is 4 weeks. The entire building process on your home just came to a screeching halt and the Builder's cash flow projection just flew out the window as the bank draws will now be delayed.

Because of the delay, the trades have all pulled off the job and are now working for another Builder across town. Your Builder has no idea when he can get them back working on your home. Just the rumor of a change order on your job can encourage the workman to pull off and work somewhere else. After all, they need to feed their families and know they won't be getting paid until their work is complete and who knows when that's going to be now that things are changing.

The cost of a Change Order for a home under construction is difficult for the Builder to calculate as a modification can have multiple consequences way beyond the item that's changing. No matter what the cost of the Change Order, the homeowner usually feels that it sounds like too much! After all, who wants to hear their home is now going to cost a lot more!

In reality, Custom Builders actually end up losing money on changes as they normally have ramifications to other cost items that even the Builder can't foresee. He's quoted the Owners a set amount for the modification and now he has to tell them the Change Order is twice as much. You can just imagine how well that's going to go over!

Custom Home Building Secrets

However, Production Builder change orders are an entirely different ballgame! This is possibly where Builders got the rip off reputation. Upgrades and change orders for production builders are definitely profit centers. In fact, they are huge money makers for them. When I worked for a production builder I saw mark ups well over 100% of actual cost!

Production Builders have a set list of upgrades you can select from. They have been carefully priced before the first home in the community has been constructed. With Custom Builders ever change has to be priced on the fly, while the pieces and parts of the home are still moving.

Custom building and production building is like comparing night and day.

Building A New Custom Home Is Fun!

Why does gambling in Las Vegas have such a wonderful reputation? Talk to anyone that has just returned from Vegas and ask them about their experience. "We had a wonderful time"! "Did you gamble while you were there"? "Oh, yes"! "How did you do at the casino"? The normal response, "We won a little, came out ahead" or "We were ahead until the last day." If the wife is out of ear shot the husband will say, "I was ahead but my wife lost it on the last day." How can everyone that goes to Las Vegas come home ahead or break even? Have you seen that place? It's built on losers!

Ask a friend that just bought a new car if they are happy with their purchase. The typical response, "I love my car and I got a great deal"! How can everyone that buys a new car get a great deal?

Whenever I go to a dealership I get an uneasy feeling, like a lamb being led to slaughter. Their process is so slick it looks like a game of "Three Card Monty". When I leave a dealership, I feel like my pockets have been picked clean!

It's difficult for me to believe that everyone is getting a great deal. On the other hand, when people hear that you are having a new home built, the typical reply is, "I hope you have a solid marriage, good luck, you'll need it" or "How are you getting along with your Builder"?

As a Builder I can't understand why Vegas and car buying have such a positive reputation and home building has the complete opposite? Why is it that people that gamble and buy new cars are only willing to talk about the experience in a positive manner and homebuyers are not?

Frankly, not all of the homeowners that buy a Regal Classic Home are ecstatic over the experience but most of our Clients are. Many have said, "I've really enjoyed building our home and I'm going to miss this."

Building a custom home is a major investment of time and money. Not everyone is geared for the experience. Clients

Custom Home Building Secrets

that expect life to be perfect usually don't fare well. It's an opportunity to dream a dream and then watch that dream become a reality. We build a prototype together. A one of a kind, never been built before home. Even if the house plan has been built previously, the site conditions are different as well as all the Client selections. This is a one of a kind home.

Clients need to be good at negotiating win-wins, between their spouse as well as other members of the team.

What Is A Custom Home Builder?

Many times Homeowners ask, "Can I do this to my home or change that"? I usually reply, "Of course"! Other times I respond, "Your home is only limited to your imagination and your pocket book! We can do anything you want to do with your home as long as it's legal." I even sometimes reply, "If we complete your home and you don't like it, we can tear it down and start again." This is even better than McDonalds; you can have an entire home your way, as long as you are willing to pay for it.

Custom Home Builders create one-of-a-kind homes for a specific lot to an Owner's specification. We start with a blank piece of paper and go from there. Basically, you can have whatever you like when you build your home. Everything can be changed in a Custom Built Home, the walls, floors, ceiling and all the options are on the table.

We also build Semi-Custom homes! We start with a floor plan supplied by the Owner or we provide one. Even though this process may be less time consuming, you'll have to make some compromises along the way as it was not originally designed with your specific needs in mind.

How To Select A Custom Home Builder?

Frankly, true Custom Home Builders are more difficult to find than a Production Builder masquerading as a Custom Builder. There are lots of Production Builders that say, "We are Custom Home Builders" but the reality is quite different.

Below are some suggestions:

- Visit homes during the Greater Orlando Builders Associations (GOBA), Spring Parade of Homes.
- The Master Custom Builders Council (MCBC). Which are the top 25 Custom Builders in Central Florida at www.custombuilt.com.
- Family and Friends.
- Google Search for Orlando Custom Home Builders.

Once you find a Builder that you like, review the information below that tells you how to select a Custom Home Builder.

Over the years I've found:

You can pay people to work for you but you can't pay them enough to give you their heart. They either have that capacity or not. Paying more for their heart only throws good money after bad.

Select a Builder that will put their heart into constructing your dream home.

Hiring a builder is like selecting a spouse. Why do good marriages and building relationships go bad? Is it because they are bad people or just a difference in values, communication and problem solving skills?

Select a Builder who mirrors the attributes you admire. Your Builder is somebody you are going to spend a great deal of time with over the next year or years. Sometimes it takes months to develop building plans, a year to build your home, another year of warranty and more if you need help with a future issue. Having a good relationship with this person is going to be really important to you.

Your first meetings are like dates. Does your Builder:

- Show up on time?
- Take detailed notes?
- Communicate well?
- Follow up afterward with meeting notes?
- Do what he says he is going to do?
- Seem helpful or is he just focused on signing the deal?
- Is patient?
- Have a personality that would be somebody you want to have a relationship with?
- Have a wife, in a long term relationship or is this his 4th marriage?

Look carefully at his close building team: the Interior Designer, Architect, Realtor and Site Superintendent. This is the group you will be spending most of your time with.

Who's really building your home? Does your builder construct your home or does he use a site manager? If he has a site manager, what is he like? Does he have the same skills you are looking for in a builder? Is the site manager even licensed?

If your builder is also the same person that will be constructing your home and you like him, that's a big plus. A streamlined communication channel means a smaller chance of communication breakdowns. He sells you the home, builds it and follows up with warranty service. If something's not right, you know who's responsible.

It's all about the relationship:

- A period of many years.
- Your Builder will want to show your home to potential clients.
- You will want your Builder's help with future home issues.
- Your Builder will want to use you as a satisfied client reference.
- It's about the win-win!

Many clients think the best builder is an ex-tradesman. I've found they don't have the skills to manage the process successfully. Building a home is a complicated process. It's best to look for an organized and competent communicator.

A Builder needs a solid team and an organized process. Stop by one of the builder's jobs and speak with the trades on site. The workmen are usually direct, honest and will tell it like it is! They'll let you know if the Builder is a jerk, builds a quality home or if he hasn't been paid in months.

Look for:

- An experienced Builder.
- State licensed.
- Client references.
- Member of the Master Custom Builders Council or (MCBC). Which are the top 25 Custom Home Builders in Central Florida.
- Supplier and Subcontractor references.
- Warranty.
- Member of the Greater Orlando Builders Association (GOBA).

Do You Want The Biggest Custom Home Builder Or The Best?

Think about it, do you really want the largest Custom Home Builder constructing your dream home? How much time is the owner of a larger building company going to spend thinking about your home?

We are not the largest Custom Home Builder, just the best! Smaller, personalized and supervised by a Builder with over 30 years of Building experience. Your Builder is the State License holder. We purposely take on only a few projects per year so our process is personalized and controlled. Becoming the largest Custom Home Builder is the last thing we want to do. Our Clients like the idea that the same person who sells them their home is also the one that will be on site each day supervising the construction and the one to call when something's not right. You decide: do you want experience, personalized service, a higher quality home, a builder with lower overhead and better value or not?

How Much Do You Charge Per Square Foot?

I get it; perhaps the answer to that question is just a starting point for discussions. On the other hand, maybe it's like asking, "How much per pound are you charging for that new car"? I've had people call and that's the first question they ask! Sometimes that's the only question they ask if my number isn't low enough. Usually, that question means, "How much do you charge per square foot of living area"? Well, that depends.....

Since boiling an entire home down to price per square foot of living area lumps a great number of things together, the number can vary widely. How big are the front porch, lanai and garage? The larger these are, the higher the price per SF of living area. Does the house have a tile or shingle roof, pool enclosure, swimming pool? Does the price include the building lot? If you already own a lot, how big is it? The bigger the building lot the more sod, landscaping and driveway required. Do you want to live in a community with a Home Owners Association that has ridged covenants and restrictions? Some require \$125,000.00 window and door packages, others do not. Are we talking Home Depot plumbing fixtures or something much different? What kind of interior finishes do you want? So the answer to the question, "How much do you charge per SF", is like throwing a dart at a board with prices on it.

What would you like that price to be? We can throw a dart at a board or sit down and discuss what your home is really going to cost.

Which Is Better - A Cost Plus Or Fixed Price Contract?

With a **Fixed Price** contract you know exactly how much you are going to pay for your new home, unless you exceed the mutually agreed budget amounts or change the scope of the construction agreement. If the cost of material and labor increases during the construction period or the Builder's estimated costs are low, you still pay the same signed contract amount. The Builder is assuming the risk of cost increases. Since the Builder is subject to more risk in this type of transaction, he usually puts in a little budgetary fudge factor so the Homeowner pays a little more.

With a **Cost Plus contract**, the Builder provides an estimate of the building costs prior to contract signing and the buyer assumes the risk for any variance. A cost plus contract, due to its nature, is open ended. Neither the Buyer nor Builder knows the final cost of the home until the project is completed. The Builder is paid a Fixed Fee or percentage over the actual costs for overhead and profit. Periodically, the Builder provides an analysis detailing budgeted costs vs. actual and cost to complete so the Buyers know where they stand in relation to the final cost of the build. With the cost-plus basis, the homeowners know their actual costs on an ongoing basis. This helps eliminate any potential surprises when the project is completed. In this type of contract the Buyer assumes more risk so there is a potential savings over a fixed price contract.

Some Homeowners select a Cost Plus Contract because they want to make sure the Builder isn't over charging them. That's not a wise decision.

It's been said, "You can't get a fair deal from a dishonest person." I like that quote because that's what I've experienced in business. If you can't get to the point where you trust the person you are doing business with, RUN! Doing any deal with somebody that's dishonest is going to end badly. A

"Crook" spends almost every minute thinking about new ways to rip you off. The average person can't out maneuver a crook; it's what he does for a living. It's like going to a carnival thinking you can win a Kewpie Doll playing a Carnie's Rigged Game. It's not going to happen, it's a rigged game.

Wade slowly into a home building relationship and do your upfront homework. Reread the chapter, "How to Select A Custom Home Builder", and make a wise decision. Like I said, if you can't get to the point where you trust the Custom Home Builder you are about to sign a contract with, "RUN"!

Choose a Cost Plus Contract if you are comfortable not knowing how much your home is going to cost before you build; knowing that, you are determining the final outcome by the choices you make.

How To Get Your Best Deal?

How do you get your best deal when building a Custom Home? Building a Custom Home is something new for most home buyers. How do you wrap your arms around this complicated process to make great choices and not over spend? Hire a Builder that uses a design and build process.

1. Interview no more than 5 Builders that you have researched thoroughly.
2. Select one of those Custom Builders to work with.
3. Use the Architect and Interior Designer the Builder recommends.
4. Have your "Selected Builder" produce "Scopes of Work" that detail exactly what you want included in your home.
5. Using Scopes of Work and Completed Plans, have the Selected Builder provide final pricing.
6. Submit Scopes of Work and Plans to 2nd choice builder for a check price.
7. Select Builder to construct your dream home.

Interviewing 5 Custom Home Builders will provide you with enough information to make a great decision. Don't overly focus on the price per SF as this number is going to change as the plans and scopes of work are developed. The price per SF number just needs to be in the ballpark of what you want to spend. You can count on this SF number increasing!

Select one of the 5 builders to work with (see chapter, "How to Select a Custom Home Builder")

Using an Architect the Builder recommends will insure the Architect is qualified to design your dream home and since they are used to working together the process will be smoother. They will work out many issues behind the scenes that you won't have to be involved in. The Builder will help

keep the final cost in check and make sure the Architect doesn't design something that can't be built in the field or will be high maintenance.

Have the Builder's Interior Designer help you specify all the pieces and parts you want included in your dream home.

Ask your Builder's Realtor for his opinion of your plans and specifications. After all, one day you will want to sell this palace and it will be too late then to fix floor-plan defects.

The Scopes of work will specify all the building elements and the Interior Designer's specification package will provide all the other details, from columns to flooring and appliances. Everything should be included at this point or contain an allowance amount if a final decision hasn't been made. The fewer allowances the better, as you want your Builder and team pricing out a complete package.

Now that the plans and scopes of work are fully developed, your selected builder has a complete vision and so do you. He has bid out the project with his team of suppliers/subcontractors and will be able to tell you exactly what your dream home will cost.

Submitting the fully developed plans and scopes to your 2nd choice Builder will give you the peace of mind that you are paying a fair price for your home. When you hand him the bid package, make sure the 2nd choice builder understands that no substitutions will be accepted and that all you want him to do is fill in the line that says, *PRICE*. All the pricing variables between Builder 1 and 2 have been eliminated. This is extremely important; receiving multiple bids with different variables will not allow you to compare apples to apples. Believe me, no matter how capable you are, if the variables are different between the two builders, you'll never be able to determine which one is providing the best value.

Make your final Builder selection. By this point you have spent months with your 1st choice Builder. You've had an opportunity to see how he works with you and his team. Do you want to spend the next 12 months working with him? This

Builder has spent months working with you and invested a great deal of time and money. Even if you are paying Builder 1 for his time you aren't really compensating him enough for all the help and guidance for the previous months. The fair thing to do is sit down with him and review the two competing bids together.

If your 2nd choice Builder's check price is lower, now you have a tough decision. This Builder is a relative unknown entity, as you haven't spent months developing plans and specifications with him. Perhaps he's not seeing the project as clearly as Builder 1. After all, Builder 1 by now knows your project from "soup to nuts". If you have any doubts, choose Builder 1 as he's the safest bet. He's spent months earning your business, he deserves it! Remember there's more to consider here besides price.

Is Your Builder Listening To You?

At one of the first homeowner meetings, before a single shovelful of dirt has been turned, I ask one of the most important questions of the relationship. "If we were chatting two years from now, sitting on your newly created Lanai, having a glass of iced tea, what would I have to do from this day forward to have met or exceeded your expectations"?

At Regal Classic Homes, we think it's important to do what's possible for a successful build. Meeting or exceeding Client expectations is one of our goals. It's not possible to achieve that unless we understand what's most important to our Clients. I ask this question and listen very carefully to what the owners say and follow that conversation up with an email confirming that I understood them correctly. That conversation becomes the foundation of our path to that homeowner's satisfaction. Then I listen some more, develop a complete scope of work and building plans that includes all the features desired. My Interior Designer, with the owner's help, selects all the home's appointments, from flooring to roof tile. All before a single shovelful of dirt is turned.

What I hear becomes part of my notes and is reviewed during the course of the relationship. Periodically, I ask the Clients if I am meeting or exceeding their initial expectations and adjust my actions. Customer satisfaction is very important.

Emails, text messages, phone calls and site meetings are followed up with emails confirming my understanding and weekly status reports all focused upon clear communications. The last thing I want is a dissatisfied Homeowner.

Project Status Reports

Selecting a Builder that provides weekly project status reports keeps the Homeowner and Builder on the same path. If there's a problem you will know it. You won't have to wonder what's happening with your new home because you'll know what's happening!

SAMPLE

PROJECT STATUS REPORT

CLIENT: Mr. & Mrs. Jones

CLIENT PHONE: 299-2434

PROJECT: Lot 22, Windermere

WEEK ENDING: 8/01/2015

ANTICIPATED COMPLETION DATE: 12/31/15

REVISED COMPLETION DATE: _____

WORK COMPLETED: _____

WORK IN PROGRESS: _____

WORK SCHEDULED FOR NEXT WEEK: _____

OWNER REQUESTED ITEMS:

_____ DATE REQUESTED: _____

_____ DATE REQUESTED: _____

ON / AHEAD / BEHIND SCHEDULE: (REASON)

THIS INFORMATION IS BEING PROVIDED IN AN EFFORT TO KEEP YOU BETTER INFORMED WITH THE STATUS OF YOUR HOME. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS, PLEASE CALL 407-376-2997

REGAL CLASSIC HOMES ON SITE MANAGER: MIKE MCGUFFIE

Should I Hire A New Builder That's Less Expensive Or An Experienced Builder That Costs More?

Perhaps the best way to address this question is to explain why you need a Builder in the first place. I remember years ago when my daughter Melanie introduced me to one of her friends. She asked me what I did for a living. I replied, "I'm a Custom Home Builder." She replied, "So you hammer the nails"? I responded, "No I don't hammer nails or install the roofing, drywall etc." She asked, "Well, then what do you do"?

Though a Builder hires all these specialists to actually construct a home, he is the only one who sees the big picture. A Builder, through his years of experience, sees and understands what's really happening on your home site. Sure these specialists know their jobs but sometimes they overlook things.

I not only see a construction site, I actually feel a home with all my senses. Does a room size feel right? Does the space between the vanity and the bath tub feel right? Many times, I walk a job site when none of the workers are present. It allows me to actually hear potential floor, truss or joist squeaks.

Just walking across the floors allows me to feel high spots in the poured concrete or subfloor that will create issues with flooring installations. I even know what a home under construction should smell like.

Walking the roof sheathing, I can feel soft spots in a valley or pick out a crowned truss at a distance. Feeling a home is vital. It gives me the ability to head off potential issues early before a problem becomes a really huge one.

An experienced Builder can eyeball the top of the stem wall and tell that the slab elevation has been set too low before the slab gets poured.

An inexperienced Builder doesn't know what he doesn't know. Hire an experienced builder. In the long run, that's the best deal!

The new Builder's price may be lower than the Builder with 30 years of experience but who's going to end up paying the price for that lack of experience? Do you really want to have your Builder walk off the job because he's finally realized he's not going to make enough from your home to make it worthwhile or he can't pay his trades with the funds available?

Frankly, I'm tired of hearing bad contractor stories. There's the one about a woman who recently hired a Builder to remodel her home and lost \$150,000 because the Builder left town. She thought she was getting an unbelievable deal! It sure was an unbelievable deal. Go to Home Depot and get a deal but not when you are paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for your home. There's just too much at stake!

Look for a great deal on a Custom Built Home in Orlando, and then hire the most experienced Builder you can find. If you don't know how to build a home and neither do the individual trades, then you need somebody who does.

Hire the experienced Builder because you have no idea what you don't know and neither does the new, inexperienced Builder.

Does Your Builder Offer A Pre Drywall Walk-Thru?

After the framing stage of your home's construction but before insulation is the opportunity for a pre-drywall walk-thru. All the mechanicals (plumbing, electrical, HVAC and low voltage) have been completed as well as all the county required rough inspections. The Builder has performed all of his inspections and the items found have been corrected by the trades. Now is the opportunity for the Owners to take a final look at what's inside the walls of their new home before any drywall is installed. Actually, in my Company, it provides another opportunity to demonstrate to our Customers why they made the right decision when they selected Regal Classic Homes.

I explain how their home has been constructed, from footing to trusses and all the structural components that provide protection from winds up to 130 MPH. I also explain what inspection process I have performed and steps that have been taken to insure their home has been constructed to the highest standards.

Future cabinet positions have been painted on the slab as well as the location of toilets, door swings, light switches, type of floor material, ceiling fans, internet connections, shelving, appliances, counter tops and all the finish materials. Any Owner questions are addressed as this is our last look behind the walls to address any unresolved issues that will affect the completion of their home.

What I've learned over the last 30+ years is to head off issues before they become problems. One day, some little thing will go wrong after the Owners move into their home and the last thing I want them to be thinking, "Is this little issue just the tip of the iceberg? I wonder what's behind the walls"? I want to head off that question; my Owners know what's behind the walls because I showed them.

Why the Regal Team?

1. A reputable builder with over 30 years of experience constructing homes, who has built hundreds of homes. My company delivers a high level of excellence and I expect the same from my team.
2. You will be heard and understood, because Mike McGuffie is a listener. Confirmation of information by email of all correspondence and meetings to guarantee no misunderstandings...all so you don't have to worry about your home being built right.
3. A selection process for your colors and finishes that is unparalleled in Orlando.
 - a. This allows you to spend time focusing on your work, family, and other things you value.
 - b. Our Interior Designer is also an Interior Architect.
 - c. Our Interior Designer will work closely with you to bring out the best in every area of the home.
4. A referral list of satisfied homeowners. Who will reinforce your wise decision to select our company?
5. A demonstrated level of competence working with the Regal Team over the last 25 years, resulting in award winning homes and satisfied homeowners.
6. Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting and a Master Degree in Business Administration. Mike is an educated, organized and detailed builder.
7. A Builder who is a member of the prestigious Master Custom Builders Council (MCBC) whose members are the top 25 Custom Home Builders in Central Florida.
8. A team that will guide you through the entire process by listening carefully and clearly communicating the steps necessary to build your new home in a most excellent manner.
9. Our Company warrants the services we provide, which include:

- a. A one year builder warranty on everything.
 - b. Manufacturer's warranty on all major equipment and appliances, so you can be assured of a well-built home.
10. Weekly progress reports and a live web camera on site so you don't have to guess what's happening with your custom home.
 11. Your home is built by the owner of Regal Classic Homes and not by an inexperienced construction superintendent.
 12. We put our heart into building your home.

The Team Approach

Most homebuyers are aware that Builders use Subcontractors and Suppliers to construct their homes. What they may not know is that a very important part of the building process falls to a specialized team of other experts: Interior Designer, Interior Architect, Realtor and Design Architect.

At Regal Classic Homes, we find that including these experts early in the process is critical to a successful build. Often, we introduce these experts in our first Client meetings.

Realtor:

Market analysis to make sure your new home isn't over built or priced for the community.

Suggestions to ensure your new home's floor plan, elevation and features will be marketable when you decide to sell in the future.

Design Architect:

Evaluate preliminary plans, provide sketches, floor plan, site plan, elevations and possible solutions to design problems. Develop building plans for the structure of the home.

Interior Designer:

Colors, furniture placement, textures, functional analysis and provide suggested budget allowances for cabinets, plumbing fixtures, lighting, countertops etc.

Interior Architect:

Ceiling details, drawings for specific interior features designed for Client use.

The Builder, with Client input, coordinates these experts as well as Subcontractors and Suppliers to execute a fabulously constructed home.

The Right Realtor Can Be Your Best Friend!

One very important step in the process of designing your new custom home is feedback from a Realtor. I can't tell you how many Clients I've built for say, "this is our last home, we are never moving again. In fact, they'll have to carry me out of my dream home, feet first"!

The reality is much different, most homeowners in Orlando move within 5 years. Jobs change and life circumstances evolve.

Even if you live in your home for years, eventually your home is going to be placed on the market. Doesn't it make sense to seek a Realtor's opinion while you're still in the design process? It could save you from a terrible mistake.

Isn't it important to know if your floor plan is saleable? Does it contain the features the market finds desirable? Are you over-building for the neighborhood?

Realtors work with buyers and sellers every day. They have their finger on the pulse of the market. I won't buy a house or build one on speculation without a qualified Realtor's opinion.

A Realtor can save or make you thousands of dollars with this vital information. In fact, we have our Realtor provide an opinion for our buyers on every project. The best part, it's free and without obligation.

I'm not selling anything here, if you don't like what our Realtor says, go and ask one that you trust but, no matter what, don't build a New Custom Home without the help of a Realtor.

Why Don't They Build Homes In Orlando That Look Like The Ones Up North?

Why don't they build homes in Orlando that look like the ones up north, California, Midwest etc.?

That's a question we hear quite a bit in Central Florida. The short answer, there's most likely a good reason.

One thing I've learned being a Custom Home Builder, there are lots of different weather conditions throughout our great country. The Southwest is dry with lots of sun but little rain. The North is cold with snow and freezing temperatures and the Southern states have heat as well as heavy rains. Add to that different soil conditions, building codes, water tables, tornadoes and hurricanes. All of these conditions create a different set of challenges for local home builders.

In Orlando, we build on concrete slabs that are almost at ground level because the water table in many places is just 3' below grade. It's not a likely region for basements and crawl spaces.

Since we don't have to deal with snow loads, our roof trusses are less robust when compared to snow states. Additionally, due to our mild weather we don't have a frost line so freezing ground is not an issue.

You'll notice we use little wood on the exterior of your home as it doesn't survive for long. Cedar shutters will rot off our houses in just a year or two. That's why you see lots of stucco.

It rains a great deal in the Orlando area so we have to build our homes to be more water tight. Hurricanes and tropical storms can produce rain like you wouldn't believe for an entire week. We also build our homes for wind speeds up to 130 MPH!

Below are some other differences:

- Tile roofs instead of shingles as shingles only last about 15 years with our intense sun.

- Gutters and downspouts are missing as we don't have a frost line.
- Stucco exteriors as we do not experience freezing conditions.
- Single glazed aluminum windows instead of thermopane wood ones.
- Concrete block exterior walls instead of wood frame and siding.
- HVAC supply grills located on the ceiling instead of the floor as we mostly cool rather than heat.
- Homes are designed for swimming pools with pool views from each room.
- A Lanai instead of a wood deck built on the rear of the house.
- High ceilings designed for cooling the home instead of heating.
- Lots of large windows for light and bright interiors.
- Heat pumps for heating and cooling instead of natural gas heating.
- All electric appliances instead of natural gas stoves and ovens.
- St Augustine grass that looks like the weeds you normally pull out of northern lawns.

Although it may be a bit unsettling to see homes that look different from where you used to live, it's wise to follow advice from the locals. There may be important reasons why Central Florida homes are different; reasons that could be quite costly in the long term if you don't follow professional advice.

Should I Build A Home With Frame Or Concrete Block Construction?

There are a handful of exterior wall materials available to choose from but concrete block and frame are the most popular choices in Central Florida.

Remember, Orlando is a very competitive home building market. Builders are constantly evaluating construction materials and practices for the one that provides an edge over their competition. If Homebuyers demanded homes made of "plastic" and the material was approved by the Southern Building Code then that's what contractors would be building. Be suspicious of new "space age" materials with spectacular claims. If that new building material was so good, Builders would be stepping over each other to build with the new product.

Wood Frame became a popular building material in the 70's, because electricity was becoming more expensive and Homebuyers were demanding energy efficient homes. 2x4 or 2x6 exterior walls, 1/2" plywood sheathing with stucco or wood siding exterior finish was typical. Prior to that, Concrete block homes with a stucco exterior finish was the norm and they were mostly built without exterior wall insulation.

In the 70's the cost of frame and block were comparable but you could insulate a frame home with more insulation because the exterior wall cavity was larger than the open cells of concrete block.

The strength of frame and block homes were comparable and the approved termite treatment was Chlordane. Experts would say, "even if you did a bad job treating the ground under the house slab, Chlordane lasted almost forever".

Like everything else, things changed dramatically. Building codes now require homes to withstand up to 130 mph winds, termiticides became better for the environment but less effective (10 year life) and new insulating products were developed.

Today, the predominant exterior wall building material in Central Florida is Concrete block. New termiticides have replaced ineffective ones and manufactures have developed insulation that has increased the performance of concrete block structures.

Concrete block construction is durable, structurally effective against winds that can reach 130 mph during a hurricane and insulated so that power bills are minimized.

Concrete block is the way to go in Central Florida. It balances the various environmental factors with cost and energy efficiency.

Who Designs The Cabinets For Custom Homes, The Architect Or The Cabinet Company?

Most times, you can't get an Architect to design a kitchen. Sure, they draw the layout for cabinets in the kitchen, baths etc. while designing your home but it's not what they normally do. Architects basically provide the space for cabinets in their design but don't specialize in the actual cabinetry layout and design.

It's best to bring in your selected cabinetry company as you are having your house plans designed. Once you approve the preliminary plan, but before the house design gets too far advanced, it's time to call in the experts, the cabinetry company. They will take your building plans and provide actual drawings of individual cabinetry units in the kitchen and baths. Then the Architect incorporates this design into the building plans.

This is where a design build agreement with your builder comes into play. As a Homeowner, you want as many professionals guiding your cabinet design as possible; your Builder's Cabinet Company Designer, Interior Designer, Architect as well as the Builder himself. Each will be looking at your cabinetry from a different perspective with the goal being the very best layout and design for your family's needs.

The worst situation is when the architect completes a set of building plans and then sends the plans out to multiple Builders for a bid. Frankly, it's too late at this point to fix a poor set of plans and bad cabinet layouts. The best that anyone can do now is to take the completed plans and make the best of what you have. The end result will be a mediocre kitchen and bath design that you will regret.

Save Time & Money On Plan Designs!

Want to save time and money when building a Custom Home in Central Florida? Buy a stock plan.

However, there is a trick to buying the right stock plan.

The worst thing you can do as a homeowner is to buy the wrong stock plan and hire an Architect or Plan Designer on your own. I've seen way too many disasters over the years!

The homeowner buys a plan on-line thinking it will save thousands of dollars only to find out it has a basement, crawl space, frame construction, is designed for northern climates or not the right Computer Aided Design (CAD) program.

Believe me, I'm a firm believer in buying a stock plan. It saves months of design time. I can't tell you how many times lot owners have spent months with an Architect only to end up disappointed. They only wanted a 6,000 SF living area home but left the Architect 1 1/2 years later with a 7,500 SF home.

I remember buying a stock plan for some Clients for \$6,000 that was fabulous! They owned a great lot in Windermere. When the plans were originally created, it cost \$130,000 to design the plan and 1 1/2 years. We took the CAD file, brought it to my designer and after a few changes we were good to go. The plan even came with interior architectural details!

A good stock plan keeps things from getting out of control. Sometimes, a plan that started from scratch just keeps growing and growing. Before you know it, the budget is busted.

You need an experienced Builder to help you navigate the mine field!

Are Two Story Homes Less Expensive To Build Than A One Story?

This is a question that has been around for years. After all, building up is way cheaper than building out! Well, like most chicken and the egg questions, it depends.

The determining factor is usually the cost of the land. If you can buy a smaller building lot for an amount that is far less than a standard size property that would suit a one story home then the answer is yes. On the other hand, if a small lot and a big lot are basically the same price, then no.

It also depends upon what type of home you want to build. If the house is a production style house, that is a square box being built on top of another square box with average finishes, then yes, a 2 story would be less expensive.

Most New Custom Built Homes in Central Florida are constructed on lots that are priced about the same. Saving substantial dollars on the land purchase will not be possible. Additionally, most 2 story Custom Homes have more elaborate finishes than a 1 story if you take into account the grand stairway in the foyer and overlook areas.

On balance, in the Orlando area you will pay more for a 2 story Custom Home than a 1 story.

Should I Design My Home With The Master Bedroom On the 1st Or 2nd Floor?

Sounds like a pretty straight forward question, master suite up or downstairs? Your decision may not be important in the short run but when you are ready to sell your home, it's going to make a big difference.

If you ask a Central Florida Realtor they will say, position the master suite on the first floor unless there is a compelling reason to put it on the second floor. By compelling reason, they mean, a spectacular view of a lake or something like that. Why, because most buyers in the Orlando area prefer the master suite on the first floor. It's more conveniently positioned if you have a pool and easily accessible during the day from the kitchen and family areas.

Orlando Custom Home Builders recommend master suites positioned on the first floor if you are designing a new home or if you decide Orlando Home Remodeling is right for you.

But you may say, "I want my bedroom upstairs where the kids are! Do I have to design my home with the master suite on the 1st floor"? No, but it's going to cost you when it's time to sell and your home, it will be on the market longer. Don't believe me? Ask a Realtor when it's time to design your new Central Florida Custom Home. They have their finger on the pulse of buyers in this market. They experience what buyers like and what they don't, every day. It's wise to consult an experienced Realtor. If you don't know one, I have an agent whom I work with that can provide the proper guidance.

Designing The Layout Of Your Master Suite

Ok, I'll admit it; this is one of my pet peeves. Most Homeowners have two people sleeping in the master suite that get out of bed at different times. How can Architects design a master suite without a door between the master bedroom and bath? I don't care how quiet you are, the first person up is going to wake up the other!

It's personal because my wife travels and many times gets up at 4 AM! The great news, she doesn't wake me up because I designed the master suite with this in mind.

The Architect provided a vestibule between the bedroom and bathroom. We installed a solid door on the bedroom and insulated the entire common wall to the bathroom. We even installed a solid door on the bathroom so there are two solid doors between the bedroom and bathroom. The master bedroom is a tomb!

This way my wife can get up, close the door to the bedroom and never enter the bedroom again because, there is a complete dressing room on the other side of the bathroom. She gets up, turns on the stereo, goes to the kitchen for her morning coffee, showers, dresses and even uses her blow dryer without waking me. Nice!

On a lazy Sunday afternoon, if one of us decides to take a nap the master bedroom is isolated so the master bathroom can still be used. The trick here was a separate vestibule and dressing room.

This is the kind of Custom Home Designing our Company does. Tell us what problem you want us to solve that you currently have and we'll figure out a way to resolve it in your new Custom Home.

Shower Door In Master Bathroom Or Not?

One of the things I've learned over the years building homes, everyone is different. I'll provide my opinion but frankly it's a personal issue.

Installing a door- the safest bet is to install a shower door. Yes, depending upon the configuration of the shower you may have to clean it more often but at least you will always be warm. The current trend is to install a frameless door with the thicker glass (3/8") and heavy duty hinges.

Without a door- sure it's cool to go door-less and you can be sure never to clean a shower door again. On the other hand, there's a good chance you are going to be cold in your shower during the winter months. Ok, I get it, if you just moved down from up north where it's really cold it's difficult to relate to this issue. After you are here for a few years, you may change your tune. For locals, it gets cold in Central Florida in the winter - better install a door!

If you decide to go door-less make sure the top of the shower is enclosed in some manner or has a dropped soffit. I recommend a soffit dropped to 8' above finished floor (A.F.F.). That means the ceiling height will be 8' in the shower. The rest of the bathroom ceiling can be higher. What you don't want is air circulating through the shower when using it. Trust me on this one, air circulating through your shower will definitely make you cold. Additionally, lowering the ceiling to 8' in the shower holds the steam from the hot water down to a height where it will keep you comfortable.

No matter what you decide, remember, most Custom Home Owners hire a maid to clean their homes so cleaning the enclosure is not really going to be an issue anyway. On the other hand, I've seen owners that clean their own homes and use a squeegee to clean off the glass after each shower. As I mentioned previously, it's a personal decision.

A Tub In The Master Bath Or Not?

If I've learned one thing over the years, everyone has a different "get ready" process. Guys mostly take showers and are in and out of the bathroom in quick order, for the most part. The ladies are quite different. Some take a shower and others are soakers. Frankly, it just depends. Some shave their legs in the shower and others while soaking in the tub.

Even if you never use a bath tub, one day you will be looking to sell your home. If the potential buyers are soakers you just killed the deal!

Flat Roof Decks

For the purpose of this discussion, I'll call any roof that has a slope of 3:12 or less a flat roof. Technically, this is incorrect but as far as Central Florida is concerned they are flat roofs.

3 in 12 means that for every horizontal 12", the roof slopes 3". Flat roofs are technically not flat but, as far as Custom Home Builders are concerned, they all fall in the flat roof category. We hate them!

A flat roof is different from a flat roof deck. A flat roof deck is an area where it's designed for you to walk on and use as outdoor living space. If the flat roof deck is covered entirely by a roof, has a 2' overhang and is well protected from the weather it's acceptable. On the other hand, if it's not covered by a roof and exposed to the weather it's a leaker. We hate these even more!

Why do Custom Home Builders hate these roofs? They all leak. Not when the roof is first installed but over time. If you have one on your home you will learn to hate it too!

Let me explain further. Honestly, my mind isn't frozen in concrete and unwilling to try new things. I adapt to new things every day. My world is constantly changing and I love new technology. On the other hand, experience teaches me if you put lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig!

There are some things that are just bad ideas. Sure, every few years they develop a new product that is the best thing since sliced bread until it isn't. A flat roof in the Orlando area with all the rain that we get is just a bad idea, period. My 30+ years of experience teaches me this.

Flat roof decks, the hair stands up on the back of my neck even as I type this. Ok, if you want one on your house or the Architect tells you he draws them for plans all the time, I have a job for you. Tell the Architect to provide a list of addresses where he's designed houses and the flat roof decks are older than 10 years. Call or visit 5 of those homeowners. If they all

tell you they've had no problems with their decks then hire their Builder immediately.

Next, if you interview an Architect to draw your dream house plans I have another test for you. Tell him you want a flat roof deck on the second floor over your master bedroom and see what he says? If he tells you sure, no problem, run. Stop all discussion and just walk out the door. You've learned something very valuable. If your Architect will draw that detail on your dream home plans, he will draw just about anything; no matter if it's a bad idea or not. He's not the Architect for you! On the other hand, if he stutters and says, it's not a good idea to build a flat deck over your master bedroom, you know everything you need to know about flat decks. It's a bad idea because they leak!

An exposed flat roof deck over a living space is all the proof you need of a Builder or Architect's incompetence. That roof is going to leak! It will be bad enough if it leaks over your lanai but it will be a nightmare if it leaks over your living space.

If you just moved to the Central Florida area and are looking for a home design, style or feature like you had somewhere else in the world and you don't see it here, that should give you pause. There's probably a very good reason you don't see it here. It's time to ask a lot of questions and listen carefully. It's possible that idea hasn't quite made it to Central Florida but not likely. There might be a very good reason you don't see it here. There's a fine line between the cutting edge and the bleeding edge.

Well, I've said my piece as far as flat roofs and decks are concerned; now it's your turn.

Bonus Room Over The Garage Challenge

Sounds simple enough doesn't it? Deceptively simple is my reply.

Building a bonus room over a 3 car garage is easy. Doing it correctly is another thing! We've all heard that it's cheap SF, in fact it's almost free! Well, it's less expensive than kitchen SF but certainly not free. There is also the cheap bowling alley method and the more sophisticated, expensive method.

Frankly, it depends upon the intended use of the space. Bedroom, office, playroom, teenage-hang out room or home theater are examples of what the space can be used for.

What makes that building space so challenging?

1. There is attic space on 3 sides and a unconditioned garage on the other.
2. Providing enough daylight.
3. The space is long and narrow.
4. Attic ventilation is more difficult to achieve.
5. HVAC design.
6. Strange design ideas.

Let's take each issue, one at a time.

1. Summer attic temperatures in Central Florida can exceed 150 degrees F. Unlike most parts of a home, bonus rooms have attic space on three sides. Additionally, due to truss configuration, they are difficult to insulate with fiberglass batts. Special care must be taken when insulating.

Though I'm not normally a fan of spray foam insulation, a bonus space over a garage is ideal for spray foam. Foam provides a high R value in a small space and normally you only have 4" in which to insulate: the thickness of the vertical truss 2x4 web.

The floor of the garage bonus room normally has plenty of space to insulate with R- 30 fiberglass batts but care must be taken to place insulation up against the bottom of the sub

floor and not suspended below the floor sheathing leaving an unconditioned air space between the batts and the sub-floor.

2. Sure it's easy to position a single or double window at the far end of the room but that makes the room feel like a bowling alley. Other lighting options must be explored: the dreaded skylight that always leaks, dormer windows or some other light-providing design. Doing it right is obviously more expensive.

The very last thing you want to do is install double French doors with an exterior balcony at the end of a bonus space. That's a guaranteed leaker!

3. The typical 3 car garage dimensions are 32' wide x 22' deep. When building a bonus room, the goal is to get maximum useable SF. Certainly not a ceiling height of 2' at the knee wall but something reasonable. I've stretched to a 4' height at the extremes. The trick here is the interface between Architect, Homeowner, Builder and the truss manufacturer. There is a point of diminishing returns where the cost of engineering a wider bonus truss or closing the spacing between them exceeds the benefit. This is where hiring the right building team comes in.

4. Attic ventilation is of particular concern with a bonus space above a garage. Most attic spaces are ventilated by air flowing into perimeter soffits, rising along the attic side of roof sheathing then exiting vents positioned toward the peak of the roof. Anything that blocks that air flow is a problem. An overheated attic space can cause a lot of issues from cooling of the interior bonus space to moisture removal. Attic ventilation is not an issue with spray foam as the the space is required to be unvented when using foam except for the use of an Energy Recovery Vent (ERV).

As soon as a Builder expects a tradesman to see an issue that is beyond his normal thinking, there is a problem. Expecting a painter to think "waterproofing", a framer to think "attic air flow" or a roofer to think "attic ventilation" there is going to be an issue. THE BUILDER IS THE ONLY TEAM

MEMBER THAT SEES THE ENTIRE PICTURE. That's why hiring the right Builder that has years of experience is so vital. He knows from years of problem solving what to look out for. He knows because it bit him in the butt before!

5. The best way to air condition bonus space is with its own designated unit! It's difficult enough to condition living space that has attic space on 3 sides and a hot garage on the other, without tacking the bonus space air conditioning load on to a system that is already cooling another part of the house. If you don't want to have a hot bonus space, better make sure it has its own HVAC unit.

This is an area where the Builder has to bring the HVAC contractor into the design early to avoid issues down the road. It's too late once the house is designed and the framing is complete. At that point, all the HVAC contractor can do is make the best of a bad set of options.

6. Strange design ideas is another area of concern. I've seen dormer windows that are 2' wide drawn on plans by Architects. Why is that an issue you ask? A narrow dormer translates into a long unusable light-shaft in a bonus space. Depending upon the pitch of the roof, a poorly designed dormer can be a huge waste of space and an eyesore. Imagine a 3' wide space 10' long! I'm not talking about just one of these, picture 2-6 of these babies! Now you get the picture! Big time ugly!

A dormer can be designed in such a way as to make it wider so it can be a space with a desk or other useable area, not some ugly unusable light shaft.

A well-designed bonus room is not just some afterthought that is slapped on a home design at the last minute. It takes a team of dedicated members led by an experienced Builder to do this correctly.

What Size Garage Will I Need For My Home?

Sounds like a straight forward question but things are different here from other parts of the Country. As I mention in my 'Florida basement chapter" Central Florida Homes come without an actual basement under the house. Additionally, most attic spaces are unusable and outside storage sheds are prohibited by most homeowner's associations. So where do I put all my stuff? Items like bicycles, lawn equipment, tools, sports equipment, pressure washer, jet skis, boat and more?

Frankly, most Florida homes are woefully inadequate when it comes to storage space. Custom homes normally come with a 3 car garage but even that leaves something to be desired. That's why most garages are packed full with stuff. Additionally, most homeowners associations ban overnight parking in the street.

Normally, 2 cars are parked in the garage and the smaller 1 car garage space is for all the stuff. So my point is, think carefully about storage before you design you custom home.

What's a Florida Basement And Do I Need One?

When homeowners move to Central Florida from other states, one of the first things they ask, where are the basements and where am I going to store all my stuff? Since we can dig a hole and hit ground water at 3' in most locations, a basement isn't practical in the Orlando area. Even in areas that have higher ground elevations, basements are not recommended due to our high humidity. Fear not, there is another solution, a Florida basement!

The difference between Florida and northern basements, we locate ours up in the attic instead of under the house. Of course, we have to add air conditioning but a large accessory space is possible if the home is designed with an additional storage area in mind. That's where custom home building comes in.

Do I need a Florida basement? Why can't I just store items in the attic space above the garage like I did up north? Although that sounds like a great idea, not much will survive in an Orlando attic where temperatures can reach 150 degrees. Holiday decorations won't even last a year with those temperatures. Our attic spaces are only good for storing old, car tire rims.

Oh sure, almost every garage has a disappearing stairway up to an attic space but few women have the courage to actually use the "stairway to heaven". Besides, you'll have to pull the car out of the garage and move all the junk first. A Florida basement is just more practical.

The air conditioned storage spaces are easily accessible, well lit and designed with convenience in mind. Many have built in shelving and finished out with painted drywall. Now you know where Orlando homeowners store all their stuff!

Don't Forget Electrical Outlets For Holiday and Landscape Lighting

When building your new Central Florida Luxury Home, don't forget to ask the electrician to provide outlets on the exterior of your home for landscape and holiday lighting.

Exterior lighting is often overlooked but very important. You've spent a lot of money building your home with all the special touches so accenting the outside of your beautiful home is vital, such as, that special landscape grouping, waterfall, fountain, trim detail, pool area or expensive palm tree.

Even if you decide not to install landscape lighting while you're building your home, you'll need someplace to plug them in when you do. It's best to have your Builder's landscape lighting company preplan how the system will be laid out and installed.

While you're at it, preplan for Christmas, Chanukah, Halloween or other special occasion lighting. GFI outlets may need to be installed in soffit overhangs on the two story section of your home. It is something that will come in handy at holiday time.

Don't forget to surge protect the landscape lighting to avoid a nasty power surge that back flows into your home's electrical system if there is a lightning strike.

Pocket Doors, Homeowners Love Them But Why Do Builders Hate Them?

Homeowners, Interior Designers and Architects love pocket doors but Builders hate them. Interior pocket doors save space, approximately 10 SF and are so cool! It's not surprising homeowners love them but what's the rest of the story?

From a Builder perspective the cost differential between a pocket and typical swing door is insignificant. The real issue is maintenance. Builders can guarantee there will be service calls during the warranty period related to a pocket door. A family with young children will have the most issues. Pocket doors fall off the track and basically don't hold up well to rough treatment. Homeowners like pocket doors until they have to live with them.

Despite the service issues, if you choose to design pocket doors into your Custom Home there are some things to keep in mind.

Solid MDF pocket doors have fewer issues with warping as opposed to hollow core types and fall off the track less frequently due to their weight.

Care must be taken when locating pocket doors in your home due to *placement restrictions*. Pocket doors should be kept away from moisture areas such as tubs and showers due to warping with exposure to high humidity. Also pocket doors restrict the placement of switches, outlets and towel bars. None can be placed on a pocket door wall. The worst interior pocket doors are the double door type. Each slide into its own hideaway pocket and when closed, meet in the middle. Frankly, there's no way to keep those doors on the track.

The maintenance issue with regards to pocket doors is what it takes to fix them once they stop operating properly. It usually requires the removal of the surrounding trim, repositioning the door then repainting the door and trim after the repair.

Pocket doors are more *difficult to operate* as the operating hardware is located in the edge of the door. It takes nimble fingers and not recommended for the elderly. Locking them takes even more effort.

The seal around pocket doors leave a lot to be desired. By their very nature, this type of door *does not provide adequate sound control* for bedrooms, bathrooms and other locations where privacy is required.

Pocket doors are energy inefficient. During a recent “blower door” test, I observed how much outside air was leaking around the door and trim. Here we are as building professionals, doing everything we can to tighten the building envelope, only to lose efficiency with each pocket door we install.

Just because the Architect draws them on your plans doesn't mean you are going to love that pocket door in the long run.

What Happened To The Coat Closet In My Florida Home?

I don't know what happened to the coat closet. It was probably some Architect's great idea many years ago. Perhaps, the trend started in South Florida or Miami. After all, this is Florida! Who needs a coat?

It wasn't too many years ago when you had to be careful when you purchased a Florida car as it usually came without a heater. It was a lesson you learned the hard way when it turned cold in New York and found out your car didn't have one.

There's an old Florida joke. You can tell what year somebody moved to Florida by the age of their winter coat! There may be some truth to that saying but Floridians still wear coats, jackets and lots of sweaters in the winter.

If a coat closet is something you want built into your Orlando custom home, you have to ask for one as they are not standard equipment. Perhaps it's better located in the area between the garage and the kitchen rather than by the front door since that's the area that receives the most traffic.

Make All Your Selections Before Your Start Building

Want to enjoy building your Custom Home with less stress and know how much it's going to cost before your start building? Then make all your selections before you start construction.

Pick out all your colors, appliances, plumbing fixtures, flooring, cabinets and counter tops etc. before your Builder pours the footings. It's less stressful for you the Owners and a smoother process for you and the Builder.

Imagine the Builder has just poured the footings and is soon going to pour the slab. What if your cabinet company says that the work triangle in the kitchen is all wrong and recommends the kitchen be redesigned but the installed underground plumbing is in the wrong location or the Interior Designer recommends a floor outlet in the family and living rooms. You might also find the perfect marble flooring but the slab needs to be recessed in the foyer to accommodate the mud set? You've always dreamed of a downdraft cook top but the slab has already been poured! All the above scenarios are possible and more.

As soon as the plans are underway, it's time to start working with the Interior Designer. There's lots to do and the last thing you want to do is hold up the process. Building costs may be rising and now is the time to get all the features nailed down and the prices locked in. The interest clock on your construction loan is ticking and the costs are mounting up.

Once your selections are complete and the Builder has provided the cost for your dream home, you can sit back, relax and enjoy the excitement of watching your dream take shape. The last thing you want to do is scramble at the last minute or have the Builder stop construction waiting for you and the Interior Designer make up your minds.

Michael McGuffie

It's best to make all the decisions up front so building your home can be an enjoyable experience. Besides, your builder will love you for it!

Where To Spend Your Money

Once you've selected your lot, where should you spend your money when building?

Realtors will tell you a house should have 3 wow's! What they mean is, you can spend money all over your new custom home and nobody will notice. A little here, a little there, upgrading along the way but nobody will ever notice the dollars you spent.

It's better to concentrate the money spent on upgrades into 3 wows! The magical 3 wows are what sell a home.

Of course, a home must be inviting from the street to entice buyers into your home. After that, it takes 3 wows to sell your home. Usually it's the kitchen, master suite and the money shot when standing in the foyer.

A home should be like opening a present; buyers like to experience little surprises as they experience your home.

Don't forget to make the area outside your front door sharp. Most people judge the quality of your home by what they see standing outside while they wait for you to answer the door. Don't scrimp in this area or it will hurt you when it's time to sell.

Design Trends

According to top homebuilding experts in Orlando, below are the hottest trends for 2015:

Patty Guthrie, director at Mark-Michaels:

- Disappearing walls.
- Pet suites off the kitchen area.
- Double Island sinks in the kitchen.
- Porcelain tile.
- Open baths like hotel spas.
- Open-space feeling inside the home.
- Huge windows in the house and kitchen.
- Exaggerated thicknesses.
- Houses that feel like Florida.

Tony Weremeichik, principle of architectural design at Canin and Associates:

- Seamless indoor-outdoor connection.
- Exterior courtyards.
- Spa showers.
- Steam-convection oven instead of a microwave oven.
- Modern Mediterranean elevations not Old World but Modern Contemporary.
- Four and five car garages designed for storage.
- The home should feel like a resort.
- Drop zones.
- Multi generational suites- kids move back in and so do moms and dads.
- Modern Mediterranean.
- A domestic suite.
- Jewelry box inside the master closet with its separate space.
- Mid Century Modern.
- Open spaces.

Shanna Bender, owner-design principle at Design 15: who works with a lot of international buyers.

- Smoother cleaner interiors, lighter, brighter.
- Where do the design trends come from:
 - Clients, music, jewelry, cars, furniture and nature.
- Organic in shape form and function.
- Neutral and soft pallets for modern and traditional homes.
- Drama in lighting-day or night.
- Stone, water.
- Wood materials, free form material.
- Technology in design-kitchen and cabinets.
- Old world is very out!
- Contemporary but not yet modern is the trend.
- Downsizing-more efficient spaces.
- The breakfast nook has morphed into every day eating space.
- International buyers influencing our local trends.

What Do Flooring Materials Cost?

There is a wide selection of flooring products to choose from. Custom Homes may have carpet, ceramic tile, porcelain tile, hardwood or stone. What you choose has a great deal of impact on the cost of your home.

Suppliers don't make selecting flooring products any easier since materials can be priced by the square foot or square yard. Additionally, the cost of installation varies too.

For this discussion, all products will be priced per SF. The below costs are generalizations for comparison purposes only.

Carpet- \$20/SY with 6 oz pad is \$2/SF installed.

Hardwood Flooring- Wood veneer is normally \$7-\$9/SF installed but you have to add floor preparation and transition strips if required. Normally some slab prep is required no matter how good the concrete slab contractor is. If you want to eliminate transition strips, quite a bit of floor prep may be required depending upon the thickness of abutting floor materials. Laminated flooring is not recommended.

Ceramic Tile- material \$3.50/SF.

Install Labor \$3.00/SF

Crack Suppression \$1.25/SF

Shower niches, diagonal, mosaics and brick patterns are additional costs.

Porcelain Tile- Material \$5.50/SF

Install Labor \$3.00/SF

Crack Suppression \$1.25/SF

Stone- Material \$5.00-\$10.00/SF

Install Labor \$7.00/SF

Hardwood Flooring Placement

In the real world, toilets overflow, refrigerators leak and accidents happen.

Families have children, pets and all the other things that make a house a home.

People will say to put hardwood flooring in your kitchen, foyer, bathroom or main traffic areas but I would advise against it.

Engineered hardwood flooring does not hold up well in these areas. I know people will tell you differently; but in my humble opinion experience teaches me not to advise it.

Foyer- It's a high traffic area and the first place we step when entering a home. Dirt and sand is tough on hardwood finishes. Better to use a more durable material like tile or stone.

Use hardwood in low traffic areas like a living room, master bedroom, dining room and avoid main traffic areas.

Kitchen- you must be joking? Grease, water, spills, certainly not a place for an engineered wood product that doesn't tolerate abuse.

Bathroom- Bath tubs flood, toilets overflow, I suggest you pass on placing hardwood flooring close to any wet area.

Some people may disagree with me, especially interior designers, but with more than 30 years of homebuilding experience, the above is what I recommend for your custom built home.

What Size Lot Should I Buy?

When it comes to lot size, bigger is not always better. Homeowners ask Custom Builders what size lot should I buy? Locals will reply, one a great deal smaller than you had up north!

Central Florida is located in the sub-tropics so everything grows, including the grass and landscape foliage. In the summer, the grass has to be cut once per week as it rains almost every day. I'm talking end of the world type rain storm too. A real Florida gully washer is something to behold. It's like something out of a Hollywood movie. Thunder, lightning bolts like you've never seen and horizontal rain! After all, Central Florida is called the lightning capital of the world!

For do it yourselves, that means a lot of grass cutting, weeding and trimming. Most Orlando custom home owners hire a landscaping company rather than tackle the yard themselves. Watch a landscaper working; it's difficult not to feel sorry for them. It's a hot nasty job!

Most northerners when they relocate to the Orlando area ask, where can I buy a few acres of land. I like to have room between my home and the neighbors. Although that might seem like a logical idea, they haven't taken into account how much maintenance even an acre size lot requires. Believe me, if you buy an acre size lot, you will regret it!

I live on a 1/4 acre and frankly, that's plenty of work. I pay my landscaper \$130/mo to cut, weed and trim. That covers the grass and the shrubs. You can quickly see that's \$130 x 4 = \$520 per month if you own an acre. The winter months don't provide any relief from the monthly cost either. Professional landscapers charge the same price year round as there's still lots of work even in the cooler months.

The sub-tropics are quite different from other parts of the country; working in the yard is not as much fun as it may be elsewhere. Ask around before you take the plunge and buy a big lot. If you must go big, 1/2 acre is the maximum size I

would recommend. That will provide enough room for a nice size front and rear yard as well as a reasonable distance between side neighbors.

Should I Buy A Corner Lot?

The popularity of corner lots goes all the way back to the days of the horse and carriage. Homeowners would pay a premium for a lot where the barn, animals and the unpleasant odors were away from the main house. Now, years later, that rumor still persists. Some lot-buyers still think buying a corner lot is the way to go. As a Custom Home Builder, I can assure you that's far from the truth. A corner lot is actually a detriment and should sell for a discount.

Here's why:

1. Corner lots have three rear yard neighbors instead of just one so privacy is limited.
2. They usually require privacy fences due to having multiple rear neighbors.
3. Homes built on a corner lot have to be custom designed due to setback and positioning issues. Most stock plans will be out of the question and a custom design will cost more.
4. Building setbacks are more severe for corner lots so the front yard is quite large while the rear yard where you actually need more privacy is curtailed. The lot actually has 2 front setbacks, front and front side.
5. Since corner lots have in effect two front yards, assessments for sewer, water lines and road construction are higher for corner properties.
6. Finished homes on corner lots are more difficult to resell due to the above reasons that become apparent once a home is constructed on the property.

There is one advantage to a corner lot in communities with front facing garages. A corner lot enables you to position the garage so the overhead door faces away from the front door of the house. This doesn't apply to Custom Home Communities as they usually require motor-courts or side entry garages.

Buying A Building Lot; 5 Things To Consider

Low Side Of The Road- it's one of those issues that has multiple consequences.

1. Drainage issues, as water still runs down hill.
2. More fill, as finish floor level will have to be set higher to compensate for poor drainage.
3. Lower resale value, as a home on the low side of the road never presents itself as well as one positioned on a hill overlooking the street. In the worst cases, the roof is about all you see from the road.

Soil Testing- most Realtors will advise buyers to obtain a soil test from a reputable soil engineering company. That's great advice but only if you know exactly where your new home will be placed as well as the pool. One part of the property can have wonderful soil and another organic muck. Soil borings in the home's footprint is the only acceptable soil test. Additionally, most soil borings only test the top 6' or less. If the lot has already been filled, bad soil may be missed entirely.

Orientation To The Sun- the best orientation is when the rear of the house faces south. The interior of your home gets plenty of indirect daylight without the heat of the direct sunlight. The exception is during the winter, when the sun is lower in the sky and the warmth of the sun is welcome. This is especially true in Central Florida where most homes have a pool and all of the rooms are positioned for a view through the windows to the pool. The worst orientation in Orlando is when the rear faces west. In the summer the sun sets late in the day, making the Lanai almost uninhabitable until sunset.

Fill Dirt- homeowners won't know how much fill is required until the finished floor elevation is obtained. Sometimes what's provided by the community developer is the finished pad elevation, which could be 16" lower than the finished floor (FF) elevation. Other times, the FF elevation may not even be available and must be calculated.

Subdivision Covenants and Restrictions- many times they don't contain extraordinary surprises, other times, they contain items that could cost the homeowner thousands of dollars. Better check them out to avoid nasty surprises.

Finally, there are many other issues to consider before purchasing a building lot. It's best to have an experienced Builder guide you through the minefield. Better yet, call an award winning Custom Home Builder who writes an informative book, like Regal Classic Homes.

It's like what they say in Texas, "ya dance with the one who brung ya"!

5 More Things To Consider Before Buying A Building Lot

Floor Plan, Septic System, Front Drainage Swale, Existing Neighbors, Maintenance of Homes are all important items to consider before you buy a building lot for your new Custom Home.

Floor Plan- so do you want to live in your lot or your new home? What on earth does that mean? Too often, I'm contacted by lot owners that want me to build a home within the confines of their lot, only to inform them their home has to be designed contrary to the floor plan they really want. Since the floor plan of your new Custom Home is the most important item, start with that and find a lot that fits your plan. Perhaps you wanted a 1 story home, then find out after you buy your lot and consider all the site variables (septic system, setbacks, pool etc.) that you can only build a 2 story home? Start with your floor plan and buy a lot that accommodates your design.

Septic System- some tight building lots require the Septic System to be designed first before a floor plan can even be considered? Others require a large mound placed in the front of your home. Still others will require you to provide a new drinking well for your next door neighbor, so you can place your septic drain field. These issues should all be worked out before you buy that lot, to avoid nasty and usually expensive surprises.

Front Drainage Swale- when in doubt, look about. The best indication of site conditions on a potential building lot is what you see in your neighborhood. Look for another lot that looks something like yours and see how their Builder managed the site conditions. Are there large swales (trenches) in front of the other homes? Did they install culvert pipes under their driveways and along the front property line? After a hard rain is there water standing in the driveway by the

edge of the road? All indications of what you can expect when your home is constructed.

Existing Neighbors- after you buy your building lot, it's too late to find out they throw wild parties every weekend or have a rock band. Visit the building lot at different times of the day. Go meet the neighbors before you buy. There's no telling what information you can gather just by speaking with the neighbors.

Maintenance Of Homes- you can tell a great deal about a neighborhood just by looking at the homes in the community. Are the homes well maintained? Look at the landscaping, where the cars are parked and the condition of exterior paint. These are indications of a healthy community or not.

It's best to have the eyes of an experienced Builder look at your building lot before you buy. If you already own the lot, hire a Builder to work out all the site issues before you design your home.

What Orientation To The Sun Is Best For My Home?

Frankly, I'm surprised so few Homeowners pay attention to the direction of the sun in relation to their home. It really makes a huge difference! More specifically, if the sun shines directly on the side of your home that has the most window glass; your power bill is going to sky rocket. Most Florida homes have lots of glass on the front and rear of their homes and little on the sides. The overhangs are normally 16" wide on all sides with some additional shading by the front door and maximum shading on the rear porch or Lanai. Additionally, if your Lanai is positioned on the side of the house that receives the late afternoon, summer sun, it's going to be almost unusable until the sun goes down around 9PM. Also, if you are a late riser, positioning your master bedroom away from the rising sun may be important to you too.

For the purpose of this discussion I'm determining orientation to the sun as the position the front of your home will face in relation to the sun's rays.

Eastern Exposure- The last time I checked the sun still rises in the east no matter where you live. That said, if the front of your home faces east you will have the direct rays of the sun striking all the front window glass until noon. After that, the front elevation will be in shade until the next day. With eastern exposure the Lanai will receive the late afternoon sun. That may not be an issue for you in the winter when the warming sun is welcome but in the summer your Lanai will be quite uncomfortable. If you are fortunate enough to have lake front property, the sun reflecting off the water will magnify the effects of the setting sun.

Southern Exposure- The front of your home will receive a great deal of the warming, winter sun, when it's lower in the sky and a moderate amount of the summer sun when it's at the apex. Since the rear of your home will be facing north,

the Lanai will receive none of the sun's direct rays and will be cool winter and summer.

Western Exposure- Since the front of your home has lots of glass windows your home will be light and bright all afternoon until sunset. This is the least energy efficient exposure if you are determined to have lower power bills. Having drapes on all the front facing windows would be a necessity. The rear Lanai would be a wonderful spot for morning coffee and watching the sunrise.

Northern Exposure- The front windows will not receive any of the sun's direct rays but quite a bit of reflective light. The sun will arc above your rear lanai but the lanai will receive none of the sun's direct light. This is the most energy efficient exposure to the sun.

Below is my personal ranking of the best and worst exposure to the sun.

1. Northern- best.
2. Southern
3. Western
4. Eastern- least.

If you've already purchased your building lot, before you build is the time to minimize or maximize the effects of the sun depending upon your preferences. There are features that can be designed into your home up front but will be difficult to modify once the plans are completed.

Should I Save The Trees On My Building Lot?

To tree or not to tree, that is the question?

I guess like most choices in life it depends upon your priorities. If you want to have an energy efficient home with lots of shade trees so your home stays cool, then yes. If you want a low maintenance home, then no.

Homeowners are under the impression that Builder's hate trees and want to cut down as many as possible, as it makes building the home easier. I guess they got that impression by observing Production Builder Subdivisions where all the trees are removed so the developer can take the dirt from the high spots and use it in the low areas. That observation is probably true. On the other hand, with Orlando Area Custom Home Builders that certainly isn't the case.

With Custom Builders, you can have almost anything you want. If you want us to save all the existing trees, then no problem, we save every tree that is not in the way of the house, pool or driveway. If you want all the trees on your lot removed, we can do that too, as long as we are building according to the local codes.

Before you make the decision regarding your trees, it's important to know some additional information:

1. Do not plant or keep an existing tree that is closer than 15' from your home. Trees that are close to your home will create future damage to your foundation.
2. Termites love wood and tree roots. If you want to minimize future termite activity, keep trees well away from your home.
3. Remove all the pine trees from your lot as they normally get diseased, snap off in high winds, provide little shade and produce a lot of pine needles that end up everywhere, including your pool or screen enclosure.

4. Most Florida trees don't have a tap root like northern trees, due to the high water table. The roots spread horizontally, at least equal to the width of the tree canopy. That can be 40'-50'!
5. Tree roots will damage or destroy sidewalks, driveways, pool decks, sewer, water and irrigation lines, septic drain fields and the foundation of your home.
6. Orlando trees require lots of maintenance. They should be trimmed and thinned out once a year, prior to hurricane season to avoid having them blown-over on top of your roof.
7. The canopy of the tree, thick with leaves will block the sun from shining on your new sod and eventually kill it.

Now that I presented most of the tree issues, it's important to know that I'm not advocating treeless properties! As a matter of fact, I love trees! I'm advocating wise tree decisions. Remove trees that are not going to be beneficial and plant new ones that will add to the value of your home. I call that thinking smart! I can't tell you how many Homeowners have told me, " Mike I want to save absolutely every tree on this property", only to regret that decision after they occupy their new home.

On the other hand, other Homeowners that have lived with treed lots at their prior residence tell me, "Mike cut every tree down on our property because we've lived with the tree nightmare before."

As a Builder, I'm here to guide you through the process of constructing your "Dream Home". I'll provide helpful information so you too can make "smart decisions".

Quality, It Has To Be Built In, Not Inspected Into A Home

I once had a potential Customer tell me that all Builders are basically the same. He said "they have to build to the same code so all I have to do is beat you up on the cosmetic items".

What he was implying is that all Builders have to construct a home to the Southern Building Code so the end result is basically the same. The County Inspectors make sure the house is built properly.

As a Builder with over 30 years of experience, I will tell you that's far from the truth. The Building Department only inspects for the minimum standard. It's selecting the right Builder that determines the quality level of your home. Choose a Builder that has developed a strong team of professionals over the years to provide a quality home.

Hiring a home inspector is not the answer either. Can you imagine somebody paying \$500 for a home inspector and that's going to insure your home is built to the highest standards? Quality has to be built into a home, not inspected into it after the work has already been completed.

Over the years I've found:

You can pay people to work for you but you can't pay them enough to give you their heart. They either have that capacity or not. Paying more for someone's heart only throws good money after bad.

Select a Builder who will put this heart into constructing your dream home.

Look for:

- An experienced Builder.
- State licensed.
- Client references.
- Member of the Master Custom Builders Council or (MCBC). Which are the top 25 Custom Home Builders in Central Florida.

Michael McGuffie

- Supplier and Subcontractor references.
- Warranty.
- Member of the local homebuilders Association (GOBA).

Can I Use My Own Subcontractors Or Suppliers?

This is a question Clients often ask. The short answer is, it's a bad idea.

When managing people the best way to make sure they perform to the highest standard is to make them responsible for the outcome and have no excuse but to perform.

Absolutely every time I've made an exception, the Client and I always regretted that decision. The Builder has a team that is conditioned to working together and interested in being included in the next job. An outside vendor understands this job is a one shot deal. A long term relationship is not in the cards. Unfortunately, they also perform that way.

When I was new to the business, I allowed one of my first clients to use an outside vendor. They had a close relationship with a national paint company that was giving him the paint for free. Despite my advice to the contrary we used his supplier.

They provided the 5 gallon buckets of interior paint with a life-time warranty. We asked for specific application instructions and were told to apply as normal. Our painter sprayed the entire inside of the house with the free paint and all of it peeled off the walls and ceilings, not in sheets but in bits and pieces.

After site visits from the factory experts and many accusations, the supplier determined that they should have provided our painter with a specific primer.

To fix the painting fiasco, we provided a team of 5 drywall finishers for 2 weeks to completely smooth and refinish the entire drywall surface. The project was delayed by several weeks and additional supervision was required.

New primer now applied, our painter sprayed a new test area only to have the paint peel a second time. The supplier threw up his hands and told us to use our regular paint. We

continued painting without any additional problems. So much for the free paint!

Another Client insisted they wanted to have a boat dock installed while we were building their home but hire their own boat dock company to avoid paying my markup. I was young and dumb so I agreed. They also wanted to use my excavation subcontractor to clear the area where the boat dock was to be installed. Being a great guy, I agreed.

The Client directed the excavator to clear a specific area for the dock without first obtaining a survey. The dock was built as specified. After the home was finished and the Client moved into their new home, I received a phone call informing me that the boat dock was constructed on the neighbor's property instead of the Owners and that I was responsible because he used my subcontractor.

When you hire a Builder, make sure the plans and scope of work spell out everything that is to be accomplished and then turn him loose to do his job. If something's wrong, it's his responsibility. In fact, no matter what happens once a Builder steps onto the job, everyone holds him responsible from the Owners, neighbors, HOA, County and all the other Government agencies.

If you want a high quality job, let the Builder execute the building contract without interference. If you want to subcontract your own work have it done after you move in.

Should I Get Propane Or Electric?

Some building lots have natural gas available. If your home is one of them, natural gas is better as it's less expensive and available on demand as opposed to propane which has a tank that must be refilled.

The next choice is between propane and electric. If you grew up in the south then you are used to having all electric appliances. Everyone in the north is used to having gas. Using electric to heat your home in the winter is expensive so northern homes pipe in gas to all their appliances.

If you are used to having all electric appliances, the first thing you have to get past is the fear of using gas. Propane and natural gas are perfectly safe; millions of people use them in the U.S. safely. The other fear, can you cook with it? With a little practice, you'll get used to it. As a matter of fact, all the top chefs use gas and actually prefer it.

Every appliance that you hook up to gas saves you 1/3 the total energy cost that you would normally pay if you were hooked up to electric. Additionally, the recovery time for a gas water heater is much faster than electric. It's almost impossible to run out of hot water when you have a gas water heater.

Most Central Florida Homes have a water heater, stove, fireplace, spa heater and a BBQ grill. All of these can be connected to gas and save you lots of money. Additionally, you can get an outside fire pit, fireplace or torches.

Now you know. Sometimes it's a good thing when you have gas!

Insulation, What I Recommend

Summary:

- **Exterior walls**- concrete block, foam injected inside the block cells, with radiant barrier applied over interior furring strips.
- **Attic**- R-30 blown fiberglass with radiant-barrier roof sheathing.

The insulating systems outlined above provide excellent results with a payback period of less than 10 years; other options are more expensive with longer payback periods.

Spray Foam Insulation

When it comes to energy efficiency, many of my Homeowners ask, “Mike, how much Green \$\$\$ can you put in my pocket”?

I respond, “How much money are you willing to invest today for a potential payback sometime in the future”? Owners usually respond, I am willing to invest \$10,000-\$20,000 for energy saving features that have a payback period of 10 years or less.

Eventually, the conversation centers upon various insulation systems and the topic of spray foam attic insulation comes up.

Scenario 1:

- Spray foam insulation applied to the underside of the roof sheathing in the attic, 5 inches thick, R- 15.
- The attic space is sealed; soffit and roof vents are not required.
- The attic becomes semi-conditioned air space instead of an overheated attic that reaches 150 degrees in the summer.
- The air conditioning ductwork is installed in the attic that is now semi-conditioned air space.
- Semi-conditioned because the attic is conditioned by air that leaks from the homes living space into the attic not by supply vents.
- No insulation is installed on the attic side of the ceiling drywall.
- An energy recovery vent (ERV) is installed in the attic to eliminate moisture build up.
- System costs \$10,000 more than installing R-30, fiberglass insulation.

Scenario 2:

- Blown in fiberglass (batts) insulation is installed on the attic side of the ceiling drywall to the depth of 10" for an R-30.
- The attic space is ventilated, soffit and roof vents are required.
- Even with ventilation, the attic space can reach 150 degrees in the summer months.
- The air conditioning ductwork is installed in this hot attic space.
- An ERV is not required.

Evaluation:

Scenario 1's foam insulation seals better against air infiltration, the ductwork in run through semi-conditioned space, requires an ERV, its R value is lower and it costs \$10,000 more that scenario 2.

When both scenarios are evaluated by a Independent Certified Energy Rater taking into account all the various factors, they are considered equal.

Summary:

So you can pay \$10,000 more for scenario 1 and the payback period is never.

I'm not a proponent of spray foam attic insulation due to its cost and lengthy payback period but I do install spray foam if my homeowner's request that we do so. After all, it's their home and my job to provide information and assistance but they make the final decisions.

Solar Powered Attic Fans

The best attic ventilation for your Custom Home, I've found, are soffit vents with off ridge vents. Cool air is drawn into the soffit vents on the low side, travels upward along the inside of the roof sheathing and exits through the off ridge vents near the peak of the roof. This type of attic ventilation follows natural forces (air convection) and operates for free.

Every few years they come out with some new type of vent system for your Central Florida home. Gable vents, turbans, whole house vents, power vents as well as solar vents. None work as effectively as the system outlined above. The cost does not justify the payback period.

One other aspect of ventilation, there can be too much of a good thing. Create too much suction and it will suck air conditioning right out of the living space and cost you money.

Below is an article that adds more background information.

<http://www.energyvanguard.com/blog-building-science-HERS-BPI/bid/38676/Don-t-Let-Your-Attic-Suck-Power-Attic-Ventilators-Are-a-Bad-Idea>

Should I Upgrade To Energy Efficient Windows?

How energy efficient are windows? Frankly, not very energy efficient at all!

Most single pane windows have an energy efficiency rating of R-1. Ok, so let's really make the windows energy efficient and install high efficiency, insulated, double pane, (Thermopane) windows. Wow, we just doubled their efficiency to R-2!

Now let's really get tough and add Low E glass! We just increased the efficiency to R-3!

Sure, you can add Argon and triple pane windows to your New Custom Built home but how much energy will you really save? Last time I checked, the payback period for adding double pane low E glass windows to your home is way over 15 years. That's 15 years before you save a dime!

I'm not against insulated windows but I think it's important to know what you're getting for your investment. I provide information to my homeowners; it's up to them to decide where they want to spend their \$\$\$.

To put R values into perspective, most homes have R-30 insulation blown into the attic and foam filled block walls. A radiant barrier with a total insulating value of R-11.

If you want to save money on your future power bills look carefully at every window that the Architect draws on your plans. Don't make any exterior windows or doors any bigger than necessary.

Remember, if you want to equal the efficiency of double pane, low E windows over single pane windows all you have to do is eliminate 18SF of glass on the outside of your home. That's just one 3' X 6' window!

One other thing to consider before you upgrade to double pane windows is seal failures. It's a common problem with insulated glass. Replacing one pane of insulated glass with a seal failure costs \$200 each.

There's a joke among Realtors, don't show a home with insulated windows until afternoon. By then, the condensation in between the glass, due to broken seals, has evaporated.

If you decide to invest in insulated windows, check the warranty carefully to make sure that window seal failures are covered. Be careful of buying cheap windows as you usually get what you pay for.

New Space Age Exterior Wall Material!

It seems like almost every year a company comes out with a "New Space Age Product" that will revolutionize the entire home building process! Not only that but it will cut homeowner energy bills down to almost nothing, without any increase in building costs.

Wow, this is wonderful! In fact, it is almost unbelievable! Actually, it is unbelievable, because it's not true!

Usually a potential Client hears about this new space age product from a salesman at a building show or a inexperienced Builder who is looking for an edge on the competition.

1. Let's take all the emotion out of this issue and approach it practically. Homebuilding is an incredibly competitive business. Anyone who ever held a hammer thinks he can build a house. After all, Builders just go out and hire a bunch of subcontractor and suppliers who do all the work. The Builder just sits back, supervises the workers and collects the money. Wrong! I've been in the home building business for over 40 years and my own business for almost 30 years. Believe me, building a home is the easiest part of running a home building business. It's more complicated than you can imagine.

If I thought for a minute that a new product has just come out that will make my job easier and sell more homes, I would be all over it!

2. Do the energy savings add up? That's an easy question to answer. Are you going to just believe the manufacturer's web site or salesman? Let's hire an independent, Certified Energy Rater who analyzes energy saving products, everyday, against a Nationally Recognized and Accepted Computer Program. The Energy Rater will tell us how energy efficient the new product is by producing a Home Energy Rating System (HERS) score. We can calculate the payback period quite easily and see if the salesman's claims add up. If

they do I'll start building all my homes with the new product. I'll even pay the Energy Rater to perform the analysis. I do this on every home we build anyway.

Why are Central Florida Home Builders constructing new custom homes out of concrete masonry units (CMU'S) or more commonly known as concrete block? Because when you run the numbers it makes economic sense.

3. Will the new product cost the same as the current industry standard? Since homebuilding is so competitive don't you think Builders would switch over to a new product that was better and the same cost as the current industry standard?

4. Using any new product entails a certain amount of risk. Builders are bombarded by multiple new products everyday. It's our job to wade through the various items and balance risk against the potential benefits. As the end user of a new untried building product you will have to live with it in the long run. The Builder only has to stand behind it for a short while. If your builder is uncomfortable using it on your home, you should be too!

Try reading the installation instructions and warranty info for a new product that has been written by a team of lawyers. Believe me, when something goes wrong with it, everyone will be headed for the exits. The conclusion will be, the product was not installed properly or was used improperly by the consumer. It's smarter to let a new product season in the marketplace before using it in your home. Trust me on this one.

Upgrade Your AC System To Save \$\$\$\$

Ok, now that I have your attention let me tell you the real story.

Builder:

The Building Code requires a 14 SEER level for your HVAC system. That's a good thing!

Client:

So what if I select more of a good thing and upgrade the SEER level to the next highest level of 16 SEER? Is that a good thing to do?

Builder:

Well, yes and no. You can upgrade to 16 SEER and save even more money but there is a problem. The payback period for that level of energy efficiency is 15 years.

Client:

Wow, that's a really long time!

Builder:

That's because it costs a lot more to make a 16 SEER, HVAC system that's energy efficient.

Energy efficiency has a sweet spot. As a Builder that's what I do, help Clients find the sweet spot on their investment \$\$\$.

Homeowners want to save money on their electric bills but want to see the savings in a reasonable amount of time.

Client:

Anything more than 10 years out is too long before I see any result from the money I invest in energy saving items.

Builder:

This is the kind of question I answer all the time.

Let me help you navigate through all the energy saving products and make smart choices.

What Type of Front Door Should I Select?

Selecting a front door for an upscale home sounds deceptively easy. It's a lot more complicated than it appears, on first pass.

If you are going to try to save money on your home building budget the front door area is the last place to do it, as it sets the tone for the entire home.

I'll limit my discussion to the three most popular materials that are used for front doors in the Central Florida area: wrought iron, wood and fiberglass. Steel is another option but not usually suitable for an Orlando Custom Home.

A list of the issues to consider:

1. Orientation to the sun.
2. Protection from the elements.
3. Material.
4. Type of threshold.
5. Maintenance.
6. Type of finish.

Orientation to the sun:

Wood- if your home has an East/West orientation to the sun a wood door facing east is out of the question, in my opinion. The sun and rain are two of the worst enemies of a wood door. I'll address rain below. Direct sunlight heats the wood and causes warping. When a door warps, it no longer operates or seals properly. The result is severe energy loss.

Wrought iron- holds up well to any orientation of the sun.

Fiberglass- holds up to the sun but not as well as wrought iron.

Protection From The Elements:

Wood- unless your home has at least a 10' deep porch or overhang beyond your front door, wood is a poor option. When a wood door gets wet it swells and warps, probably in less than a year.

Wrought Iron- Holds up better to water but in the long run rusting and leaking will be an issue if not protected from the

weather. With Orlando's tropical weather conditions, a door without a substantial overhang is just a bad design idea.

Fiberglass- Since fiberglass doors have an interior wood construction; exposure to water is an issue. Will hold up better than all wood construction but I would not recommend it without a large overhang.

Material:

Wood- if you are determined to have a stained front door then solid wood is the way to go. A soft wood like pine should not be considered. Caution; the taller the door the more likely it is to warp so don't select a door over 8' in height.

Wrought Iron- doors can be beautiful, especially with various types of glass inserts but they will never have the look of a wood stained door if that's your choice. They are heavy, so using them requires a bit more muscle power.

Fiberglass- may perform slightly better than wood but it will never have the beauty of a wood door, I don't care what the salesman says.

Type Of Threshold:

There are basically 2 types of door thresholds, saddle and bumper. The only reasonable choice for the front door of an upscale custom home is a saddle threshold, due to looks and practicality for an in swing door. The drawback to the saddle type, they don't seal well and have to be adjusted periodically. I don't recommend a saddle type threshold on any door that does not have a 10' overhang to protect the door from the elements.

Maintenance:

Wood- doors look great when they are new but they require continual maintenance, especially with and east, west orientation.

Wrought iron- requires the least amount of maintenance.

Fiberglass- because the outer shell is fiberglass the door requires little maintenance, especially if it's painted.

Type of finish:

Wood- The obvious choices are stained or painted. Either is acceptable but a dark paint or stain with an east, west orientation is the kiss of death for the door. The darker colors absorb the heat from the sun and cause severe damage to the wood door. Dark colors are a poor choice.

Wrought iron- since you can't stain an iron door the only other choice is paint. It holds up well on an iron door. Paint peels off a surface because water gets behind the material and pushes it off. Water can get behind wood but not iron.

Fiberglass- can be painted or stained but I think paint looks better on a fiberglass door. Stain on fiberglass looks ok but never looks great and that's what you want for your front door.

Gutters Please!

One of the first things that people notice about homes when they move down from up north, homes in Florida don't normally have gutters and downspouts. Why is that?

The short answer, the ground in Florida never freezes. Gutters and frozen ground may seem unrelated but it's right on target. It's important to keep water away from the footings of the home. When rainwater gets below the footing and freezes, it will heave the foundation of the house right out of the ground.

Gutters and downspouts are designed to keep water from accumulating close to the house and penetrating the ground below the footings. They also keep basements and crawlspaces dry.

When I lived in Chicago, the frost line was 4' below the ground surface. Having your foundation heave out of the ground was a real possibility if water trapped under the footings froze and then expanded.

Homes in other parts of the country have crawlspaces and basements, Florida homes have concrete slabs on grade. Since Orlando doesn't have a frost line nor crawlspaces and basements, why is it important to have gutters?

Beyond the convenience of not getting wet as you come and go from your house during a rainstorm. Keeping water away from your exterior walls is important.

When a home is brand-new, so is the paint, caulking, and window and door seals. As a home ages, if it's not properly maintained, the exterior envelope will leak. Frankly, most homeowners are too busy enjoying life to maintain their home properly. Gutters and downspouts provide extra insurance.

Keeping water off the exterior walls of your home is vital; whether it's from rain water or out of control sprinkler heads.

Paint is important as a waterproofing agent, it's not just there for looks. Most people repaint their home because the

paint looks faded but they probably should have repainted years before in order to keep their home watertight.

Florida tropical storms, hurricanes and summer downpours don't help the situation. Let's face it, Florida is located in the sub-tropics!

So when you are specifying the details of your new custom home, addition or remodel, make sure you say, gutters please!

Heating Your Master Bathroom

For those of you who just recently moved from the North, it's difficult to understand when Floridians say, it's cold in Orlando during the winter! Seeing photos of people jogging in "O Town" wearing stocking caps and gloves when it's 55 degrees sounds like a skit from "Saturday Night Live". Wait a few years and your tune will change too.

For the moment, let's agree that it can get cold in Central Florida during the winter.

The homes here are built differently. There is a concrete slab under your feet with carpet or a hard surface material like stone or tile. The master bathrooms in Custom Homes are much larger and many times the showers are door-less. Being wet and standing naked on a stone floor can get downright chilly!

The heating systems are different too. We use air-air heat pumps with emergency backup heating strips that only kick in on the coldest days.

Perhaps we've all become just a bunch of wimps, but if you can afford it, why be uncomfortable?

Over the past 30 plus years, I've tried many types of systems to heat master baths, from heat lamps to wall mounted space heaters. None have really been effective at heating master baths.

In the past few years they have developed a heating system that warms the floor that is ideal for master bathrooms in Orlando. It's inexpensive, cost effective to operate and can be installed under the solid surface materials that we install on top of our concrete slabs.

It warms the floor and since heat rises, warms bath occupants as the heat travels to the ceiling. It's amazingly effective at warming master bathrooms. A radiant floor heating system doesn't replace the central heating system, it's a supplement. It can even be installed under the tile in the walk-in shower!

We installed a radiant floor heating system in our home when it was built in 2001. Frankly, it's one of my wife Ellen's favorite features!

If you have a cat or dog they will love you for it! No need to look for our cat Angel on a cold winter day. He's sprawled out in the master bath soaking up the heat from the warm tile floor. The only time he moves is to turn over and warm the other side.

If heating a master bathroom in your Custom Home is something that interests you, a radiant floor heating system is the way to go.

Below is a link to a product we used in our home and others we've built.

<http://www.emersonindustrial.com/en-us/egselectricalgroup/products/heating-cables/residential-heating-cables/residential-floor-warming/Pages/default.aspx>

Toilet Bidet

If you are interested in a bidet in your new Custom Built Home, Remodel or Renovation, a toilet/bidet combination, just may be the way to go.

The big advantage is the space savings. You don't need the extra SF of living area just for a separate bidet. Face it, it's sitting there unused most of the time anyway.

The toilet bidet combinations have some fabulous features too:

- Seat heater
- Water heater
- Front and back wash
- Self cleaning
- Deodorizer
- Even a blow dryer!

Check out this video on YouTube:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpYTUksh1xk&feature=youtube_gdata_player

Steam Shower

One of my favorite features in a Custom Home is a steam shower. It's perhaps best in a secondary bath other than the master but it's still a great feature. It's like taking a trip to the day spa without leaving the privacy of your home. The steam feels great and cleanses your skin and pores!

I would recommend a ceiling no higher than 8' so the steam is not all going to the area above your head. Slope the tile ceiling slightly away from the door so the water sheds to the wall, instead of dripping on your head. A windowless shower is best and a seat to sit on is a nice feature. I prefer the folding type that has wood slats to sit on.

I'm not a big fan of built-in seats in a shower, water has a way of finding its way through ceramic tile over the years as most homeowners don't maintain the caulk and grout in showers the way they should.

Our tile subcontractor provides additional waterproofing behind the walls in a steam shower too.

Open Or Closed Roof Valley?

What's the difference between an open or closed valley and why is that important?

At first thought, most homeowners will select a closed roof valley because it looks pretty. The problem, nobody explains the disadvantage associated with that choice.

Unless your home has no trees on the property a closed valley is a poor choice as it requires maintenance to remove leaves and debris that get trapped under the shingles or roof tile.

The trapped debris causes water to back up and results in roof leaks. Additionally, the trapped moisture causes the valley metal to rust and eventually leak.

Should My Home Have A Circular Driveway?

Absolutely! Sometimes it's not possible depending upon the size of your lot and foot print of your home but I highly recommend it.

Perhaps, one of the more annoying issues is when visitors park in front of your garage doors or block your car in the driveway. You are on your way to an important meeting, time is tight and you find your car is blocked in by a guest or one of your kids. Of course, you don't figure all this out before you are in your car backing out of the garage. Grr.....

A circular driveway positioned between your home and the street is the ideal solution. It gives guests and teenagers a place to park other than behind your car.

Of course, HOA rules don't help the parking situation either. Many ban street parking in upscale communities. In my case, street parking wasn't prohibited until 10 years after our home was built. It was somebody's bright idea on the HOA Board. Fortunately, I constructed a circular driveway when we built our home.

Orlando is all about the Florida Lifestyle, boating, jet skis, golf, tennis and lots of outdoor activities. After all, that's why we all moved here! Golf carts, boats, trailers and more, all need storage space. The extra parking in a circular drive really comes in handy.

Should I Choose A Concrete Drive and Walkway Or Pavers?

Concrete:

In the past the answer was almost, always, concrete but things have changed in Central Florida! I would like to think for the better.

Typically, flatwork concrete in Orlando is poured 4" thick with 2,500 PSI concrete, delivered and placed by a concrete subcontractor. He hires a separate concrete supplier to deliver ready mixed concrete directly from the plant. The driveway and service walk first have to be formed and the ground prepared for the concrete pour. Normally it is at least a two day process or more if a municipal inspection is required.

Concrete normally lasts for years but develops unsightly cracks over time. Additionally, the smooth concrete weathers and attracts mold. If for some reason a section of concrete has to be replaced the newly replaced section will never match the existing section.

Builders in the Orlando area have used wire mesh, fiberglass chop, more and deeper control joints, and increased the PSI to 3,000 in a effort to eliminate cracking, all without success. The truth is concrete cracks!

Whatever material you choose for your driveway and service walk, the public walk still has to be poured-in-place concrete as that is the requirement of municipalities as well as homeowner associations.

Concrete Pavers:

In more recent years, the market has shifted towards concrete pavers. They are available in many colors, sizes and finishes. In fact the choices are almost limitless!

Before placing pavers the soil is graded and covered with "concrete fines" (finely ground concrete) then compacted in place. Pavers have to be set individually, by hand, so the process is quite labor intensive. After setting, the pavers are

covered with sand to fill the joints, compacted with a vibrator and locked in place by a poured concrete border. Afterwards, the pavers are sealed to minimize future staining.

Pavers have many advantages. They normally don't crack, are easily repaired if displaced, come in many shapes, colors, sizes, four times stronger than poured-in-place concrete and backed by a manufactures warranty. The best and most convincing advantage is the cost! Though prices vary throughout the Country, in the Central Florida area pavers are \$4.00/SF vs. \$5.00/SF for poured-in-place concrete. Now you can see why most homeowners are choosing pavers over poured concrete.

Sound Insulation For Your New Home

The ideal lot is in a quiet, peaceful, neighborhood. Unfortunately, that is not always the real world circumstance. Many times, a building lot is close to downtown Orlando, a busy highway or even one of the local tourist attractions.

If you're sitting on your Lanai or front porch looking for some peace and quiet, a water feature such as a fountain or falling water will help. A bit of background music might do the trick too. You might even try a concrete block privacy wall or fast growing shrubs. Perhaps, a Viburnum hedge that grows 15' high might be a solution. On the other hand, unless you're absolutely sure the bamboo plant you are selecting is the exact clumping variety you want; do not grow any bamboo on your property! Five years down the road you might need a front end loader to dig it out.

If you want quiet inside your home, double pane windows, concrete block exterior walls with foam injected inside the block wall cavities will go a long way to making the inside of your home quieter. Avoid sliding patio doors as the air gaps let in quite a bit of noise as well as outside air.

Sound control between rooms is a different story altogether. Avoid hard flooring surfaces such as tile and hardwood. Select wall to wall carpeting for a quieter room.

Solid core interior swing doors will make a big difference in sound control. Sliding pocket doors are very poor at sound attenuation. Have your Builder insulate the interior walls of all bedrooms and the space between the 1st and 2nd floors if your home is 2 stories. Don't forget to insulate the walls on the utility and home theater rooms too!

Install insulation around PVC waste lines in your 2 story home. Years ago when cast iron piping was used in construction, water flushing down a 2nd story waste line was not an issue, now days it is. Listening to the sound of the upstairs toilet flushing is a big no, no.

Custom Home Building Secrets

Watch the gap under interior doorways. Before they changed the building code, Builders were obligated to provide a 1 1/2 " gap under all doors for air circulation. Now the code requires a return air vent inside each bedroom so the gap can be minimized.

Do I Need A Pool Heater?

After 28 years of marriage I've learned that my wife is cold in the winter because it's cold outside and cold in the summer because we have the air conditioning on. Basically, most Central Florida women (under 50) are cold all the time!

I can't tell you how many homeowner discussions I've witnessed between husband and wife regarding the need for a pool heater. Basically, if the husband wins that argument and no pool heater is installed, he ends up swimming by himself.

Most women won't swim in their Florida pool until the water reaches 85 degrees. I know, the tourists from up north swim in the ocean in January but not the locals!

Better get a pool heater unless you want to go swimming without your wife!

Exterior Paint That Lasts A Lifetime!

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

Builders are in the business to help Homeowners and to make a profit, simple. If your Builder doesn't offer a product or service to you, the consumer, it's not because he's lazy, it's because he doesn't believe in the product or service. If your Home Builder doesn't use a product it should give you pause.....

If lifetime paint was a good idea, he would paint his houses with it, simple.

See Consumer Reports:

<http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/news/2014/05/what-a-lifetime-paint-warranty-really-means/index.htm>

If paint is peeling on your custom home, it's because moisture is getting behind the paint and pushing it off your house. Look at an aluminum screen enclosure, gutter or soffit. How does the paint look? Do you see any paint peeling? Of course not, that's because water cannot pass through metal so the paint normally doesn't peel. If it's peeling then it was probably repainted improperly.

Paint on the exterior of your Central Florida custom home is a tricky issue. Your house has to breathe. Homeowners and their activities like showers and cooking produce moisture. That moisture has to have a way to get out of your home. HVAC systems, range hood vents and bath exhaust fans help but your home has to allow moisture to pass through walls and ceilings too. If your exterior wall paint doesn't breathe, the moisture will stay trapped inside your home and walls or push the paint off the house, trying to exit the structure. Paint has to seal your home but not too much!

Beware of any company that tells you their paint will last a lifetime.

Cracks In Concrete

A question that drives Builders crazy, why are there cracks in the concrete slab of my custom built home?

Consumers with little home building experience usually ask this question. It's many times delivered with an accusatory tone, as though the Builder has provided an inferior product. It's almost as though some people think you can judge how good a Builder is by the number of cracks in a concrete slab.

Hairline cracks in concrete have absolutely nothing to do with how good a Builder is. The short answer: concrete's natural tendency is to crack into squares.

A good Builder can look at a set of building plans and predict where the concrete slab is going to crack even before the concrete is poured!

Don't believe me? Next time you go for a walk in your subdivision look at the sidewalk. Public walks are usually 4' wide with a tooled control joint every 4' in length; notice you don't see many cracks in the sidewalk either. That's because the concrete finisher struck a tooled, control joint 1" deep into the concrete walkway. Striking that control joint 1/4 of the 4" concrete walks depth is the secret. The finisher knows the concrete is going to crack every 4' so he is providing a pathway for the crack to follow where it will be less noticeable, in the control joint.

The lesson here, concrete cracks in squares. A house slab with an irregular shape will have a tendency to crack in squares too.

So how do Quality Builders manage the cracks that naturally occur in house slabs?

With carpet and hardwood areas, cracks less than 1/4" wide are not normally an issue. There is a waterproof membrane under the slab to stop water intrusion and the top side is covered with a flexible material like carpet.

The slab areas that require special attention are places where tile or stone is placed on top. Quality Builders install an isolating membrane that separates the hard surface materials from the slab concrete. They do this instead of adhering hard surface materials to the building slab. This way, any obvious cracks or ones that may develop in the future will not telegraph from the slab through the tile or stone. This is an important quality feature that will be important to you as the consumer over the years.

Being proactive during the building process will minimize any future cracks that may appear in tile and stone grout joints or through the hard surface material itself.

Lightning Protection

It's been said that Central Florida is the lightning capital of the world!

I'm not sure if that's true but Orlando sure has a lot of thunder storms with accompanying lightning strikes. Experiencing my first summer lightning storm years ago was like something out of a Hollywood horror movie. Frankly, your first Florida storm is an unbelievable experience.

One storm can have thousands of lightning strikes! Listen to somebody who's actually grown up in Central Florida and they have a healthy respect for storms and you should too.

Beyond personal protection like staying indoors and not taking a bath or shower during an electrical storm, what else do I recommend to my homebuilding Clients?

There are quite a number of issues regarding home protection and it depends upon how much you want to spend.

Protection of the home's structure and electronics is one option. Lightning rods are the way to go for protecting the physical house but protecting electronics is a bit more difficult and grows more so over the years.

I remember visiting Florida relatives in the 1960's when unplugging the TV and the toaster was common practice during a storm. The number of sensitive electronic devices was quite limited. Now days, there are lots of items that can get damaged, multiple TV's and computers, air conditioners, printers, the list goes on and on. You quickly find out just how many items can get damaged if your home is struck.

The problem with lightning protection, your home doesn't have to get hit for you to loose thousands of dollars worth of gear. A tree or transformer can get hit a 100 feet from your house and follow a ground rod or electrical wire into your home.

The main power line, phone, cable, DSL and broadband all need to be protected. A builder's low voltage subcontractor can address most of the interior electronic issues. That leaves

the structure and the main power line. The power company sells a monthly service that protects your home from power surges and a lightning rod installation company can help you protect your home structure.

Sure, we all have homeowners insurance but do you really want to deal with replacing all the gear and with accompanying increases in insurance rates?

Whole House Electrical Surge From Lightning Strikes, What You May Be Doing To Encourage Them

You may be doing something that encourages a whole house power surge! If you have an electronic dog collar system, gate entry control, a yard fountain control, a booster for your cell phone signal, outside AC condenser, drinking well, landscape lighting, irrigation controls, outdoor speakers for your stereo system, pool equipment and controls, irrigation pump, outdoor network or security cameras you are encouraging a power surge.

Imagine a spider web of electronic wires spread out in your yard extending 100's of feet past the perimeter of your home and a tree gets struck with a lightning bolt. The bolt of lightning travels into the ground and is picked up by the spider web of wires. The surge from the strike travels backwards through the wires and into your home's electrical system. The result is a power surge that fries a number of electronic items, unless all those exterior items are surge-protected.

This is the type of issue a low voltage contractor can protect from happening in your new home. Something to think about and certainly not something your landscape lighting guy told you could happen.

Fabulous Lanais!

The day of the boring Lanai is definitely over! It's now an extended family room with a summer kitchen, motorized screen room, cooling misters, casual bar with a TV and fire pit. Frankly, it's an imagination space! In this section I'm going to explore Lanai possibilities.

Extension of the family room - even the flooring materials in the Lanai can be the same as the family room so one space flows into the other. The floor slab levels are even and visually the spaces are joined. Many times the doorway between the two spaces has corner sliding glass door panels that slide back and out of view. These doors can be heavy and sometimes motorized.

Screening Your Lanai - your Lanai can be screened by your pool enclosure or separately. It really depends upon the proximity of the pool in relation to the Lanai. If the pool is designed so it's parallel to the Lanai the screening of the pool and Lanai can be combined.

The entire issue becomes more complicated if your home is being built on a lake-front lot. Maximizing the view from the home becomes a big priority, so blocking your view by looking through an enclosure is undesirable.

Additionally, if the rear of your Custom Home faces west, shading from the setting sun is vital. In Orlando the summer sun may make your Lanai uninhabitable until the sun sets late in the day.

Fortunately, there is a solution! A fabulous new product called a retractable screen. A Lanai can have some fixed screen as well as retractable ones where the lake view is critical. An additional benefit is that retractable screens now have a separate sun shade feature that can be used separately or in conjunction with the insect screen. This is a wonderful feature especially on lake front property

Check out the link below for more information on this cool product!

<http://goretractable.net/products/phantom-motorized-patio-screens/>

Central Florida is full of swimming pools with screen enclosures. Most people think the reason we have screen enclosures is because we have an insect issue. Frankly, the reason we have screen enclosures on pools is because of our child safety laws.

Lanai Ceilings - for years, Builders have been placing textured drywall on Lanai ceilings in Orlando. It really wasn't a great application for a drywall product but that's what the market wanted. The knock-down texture on the drywall only made the situation worse because many homeowners couldn't tell the difference between the textured drywall and stucco. They quickly found out the drywall didn't tolerate water like stucco when they tried to wash off the cob webs and wasp nests with a hose.

Eventually, the Custom Home market demanded a new product for exterior ceilings.

There are lots of issues to discuss regarding lanai materials, that's why homeowners need an experienced Builder's help. Depending upon the style of home there are flooring, railings, columns, siding, ceiling, screening etc. choices to be made.

In this chapter I'll limit the discussion to just ceiling materials. I've supplied some links below for additional information but I also included my recommendations for most Central Florida applications.

1 x 6 Cypress "V" joint.

You can also use pine as it's less expensive if you want a raised grain look with knots.

1 x 6 #2 Pine

The Cypress has a smoother texture and a closer grain and can be stained or painted; though I recommend painting for more finish durability.

Smooth Cypress 1 x 6 can be turned over for a bead board look too.

<http://www.front-porch-ideas-and-more.com/porch-ceiling.html>

<http://celebrateusa.hubpages.com/hub/Lanai>

<https://texascustompatios.wordpress.com/2012/04/20/how-to-choose-a-finish-for-your-patio-ceiling/>

If you check out the above links, you will quickly learn that what works in one part of the US doesn't necessarily work in the Orlando Area. We have a unique environment with high moisture, insects and hurricanes.

Obtaining expert guidance is a must.

Lanai, Other Considerations - fireplace, fire pits, TV's, misters and summer kitchen.

Fireplace- Lots of options here. Most homeowners install a prefabricated one but make sure it's stainless steel. Regular steel fireplaces rust, especially if you have a pool as the chlorine vapors will attack the metal. Another option is a modular, non-metallic fireplace. Isokern makes a great product but it's a bit more expensive than a prefabricated one.

<http://earthcore.co/isokern/>

Fire Pits- have become very popular but they take up floor space. If you go this route make sure a gas line is installed before you set your flooring materials.

TV's- are most often installed above an outside fireplace. Make sure you plan for a way to keep the TV dry.

Misters- provide a cooling effect for occupants but I understand the ladies complain that it messes with their hairdos. <http://ezmister.com/>

Summer Kitchen/Bar- the sky's the limit on this one. Just make sure the cabinets are exterior grade and use stainless steel appliances.

How Do I Prevent My Ceramic Tile Floors From Cracking?

In Central Florida, Luxury Custom Homes are constructed on a poured, solid, concrete slab. No matter how qualified the Custom Home Builder, the house slab is going to crack. Since by its very nature concrete slabs crack, we must have a method of dealing with cracks that develop under ceramic, porcelain and stone flooring.

First, the concrete is scraped and cleaned, a flexible sheet membrane is applied over noticeable cracks and then a flexible, slurry, membrane called PRP is troweled over the concrete.

The purpose of the membrane is to isolate the concrete slab from the flooring material. The slab can flex and crack with temperature variations without transmitting that movement to the flooring materials.

Finally, thin-set is applied under each tile and grout applied to the joints.

Should I Hang Wallpaper In The Bathroom?

I remember years ago, there was wallpaper in the bathrooms of my childhood home in Long Island. It seemed like all bathrooms had wallpaper, back then.

The answer is, we don't build homes like we use to. Today's homes are more energy efficient than the homes that were built years ago. New homes leak less air. In fact, homes are so tightly constructed that many times air exchangers are installed to make sure the house breathes sufficiently.

The problem with tightly constructed homes is that outside/inside air is exchanged less often thus making today's home more susceptible to mold and mildew.

Wallpaper applied over drywall basically traps moisture inside the wall. It's not unusual to remove old wallpaper and find mold on the back side of the paper. Wallpaper that breathes (vapor-permeable) is better to install but frankly, I would steer clear of any wallpaper in a bathroom. The worst type of wall covering is solid type II vinyl, Mylar or foil.

If you are looking to add a little pizzazz to your bathroom, a faux finish is a better choice. It adds some style without the risks associated with wallpaper.

As I've mentioned previously, Florida is different from most every other state. Our rain and humidity cause issues you will never encounter in climate conditions like the southwestern part of the country.

For a healthier home, steer clear from hanging wallpaper in your bathroom.

Shallow Well Irrigation For Your Landscaping

Every year, prior to the spring rains, I hear from neighbors how much they are spending (\$300/mo) to water their lawn. My bills are always \$25.00 per month or less and we have one of the greenest lawns in the community. How is this possible? We water with a shallow well.

For an investment of under \$2,000 you can basically water for free, except for the cost of electricity. With a shallow well, there is normally no calcium or iron staining as there is with a deep well and the initial cost is low. I install shallow wells for my Orlando custom homebuilding clients all the time.

Here's how it's done. The well guy comes out and jets in a well point 30' deep or less. I have him install 2 – 3 well points depending upon the water volume needed. I also have the well company connect County water as an alternate in case of a severe drought where ground water may not be plentiful. I back that all up with a cartridge pool filter, just to make sure any loose sand particles don't fowl up sprinkler valves and heads. He hooks up the pump and you are done. I even use the water to fill my pool. You may find someone cheaper and cut a few corners on my system, but this is a no brainer. Spend \$2,000 and save thousands. You will return your initial investment in 2 years. I wish all home building decisions were this difficult.

What Issues Keep Home Builders Awake At Night? Part 1

A new Builder doesn't know enough to be concerned. An experienced Builder knows when the little hairs on the back of his neck are telling him something really important and that he better be listening.

Below are a few examples of items that give experienced Builders pause, when constructing your home:

1. Not having full water pressure on the hot and cold water lines during the entire construction process.
 2. Installing a new refrigerator with an ice maker the day before closing.
 3. Plumbing work that's finished late Friday afternoon when the house is almost complete.
 4. Fireplace chimneys.
 5. Flat balcony decks without a roof covering exposed to the weather.
 6. Window and door seals.
 7. Not having a good hard rain during the construction of your home.
 8. Establishing the finished floor elevation of the slab.
 9. A falling out with the Homeowner.
1. Having full water pressure on the hot and cold water lines during the entire construction process.

One of the worst issues a Builder can have after a homeowner moves into their brand, new, custom built home is a plumbing leak. Usually it's because a drywall nail or screw has penetrated one of the water lines. The lines are supposed to be protected from this by "steel nail plates" that are placed between the drywall and the plumbing pipes during rough-in. Sometimes a nail plate is missing or the penetration is from another cause.

Smart Builders keep the water lines under full pressure during the entire building process so they have every opportunity to observe a potential water leak before the owners move in. Unfortunately, building a home isn't an exact science. The water main gets shut off or the well pump that supplies the home is unplugged from the temporary power pole. Well pumps normally don't provide as much pressure as Municipal water supplies so Builders have to be extra careful.

Full water pressure can be lower than normal for any number of reasons. The worst mistake is drilling the well and connecting the pressure pump, just prior to occupancy. A recipe for disaster, I can see the new hardwood floors warping from here.

2. Installing the new refrigerator with an ice maker the day before closing.

Even though the plumber, appliance installer or Builder's handyman is a professional, ice maker connections that were perfectly dry when the refrigerator was installed decide to leak the night before closing.

3. Plumbing work that's finished late Friday afternoon when the house is almost complete.

Many of the same issues as #1 & #2 above. Experienced Builders avoid plumbing work on Fridays if possible. Believe me it's a hard lesson learned. A water leak can do a lot of damage over a weekend.

4. Fireplace chimneys- I'm willing to bet that 80 % of the fireplace chimneys in Central Florida leak. Why would that be? Simple. There are many trades involved in the construction of a chimney and it's located way up on the roof. The construction of the chimney involves the Architect, Builder, framer, roofer, stucco subcontractor, fireplace cap fabricator and painter.

That's a large number of specialists involved in a relatively small item. Unfortunately, that's what it takes to execute the fireplace chimney properly. It has to be designed properly, supervised carefully by the Builder and executed by the framer, roofer, stucco, metal manufacturer and painting subcontractors. It only takes one mistake for a failure.

The roof area is one of the most important parts of a home, especially in Central Florida where we receive so much rain. I've seen a tiny pin hole create a very large water leak. It's an item that requires special attention on the part of the Builder.

I can tell you by the looks and the comments I receive when the trades see me up on the roof inspecting the details, they are not use to seeing other Builders up there and that's not a good thing.

5. Flat balcony decks without a roof covering exposed to the weather. You can get away with a lot of poor weather proofing techniques in dry parts of the Country that won't pass muster in Central Florida. We get a lot of wind driven rain and that's not counting Hurricanes and Tropical Storms.

Experienced Builders can look at a set of plans even before the first nail is driven and tell you what design issues will create a problem. I can tell you from experience, exterior balcony decks are one of those areas.

The exterior deck execution has to be almost perfect. Areas of particular concern are railings, deck membrane, finish flooring material, door pans, exterior wall moisture barrier, deck flashings, gutters, downspouts, painting and caulking.

In my opinion, exterior decks in Central Florida should only be designed with roof coverings.

6. Window and door seals. It's just windows and doors, what can go wrong? A trained monkey can install a window or door. Yeah, right! It's all fun and games just

before something goes wrong. This may sound like overkill but I've learned to be careful the hard way. Every window and door gets field tested with a "Rain Bird" irrigation sprinkler before the homeowner moves in.

Bay windows, mitered glass panels, Lanai sliding glass doors, French doors, vertical mullions that join two windows together and single hung windows, they all can leak. Sometimes it's a manufacturing defect, other times it's an installation issue. The last thing a Builder wants is for the homeowner to discover a water leak issue after they move into their new Custom Built Home. The only way to eliminate that possibility is to water test.

Careful? Sure I am, but after my trades get done being annoyed they say, "that's the kind of Builder I want constructing my home".

7. Not having a good hard rain during the construction of your home. An experienced Builder looks forward to days with a hard rain when constructing your Orlando Custom Built Home. It gives the Builder an opportunity to water test the roof, observe how rain sheds off the structure and make sure the site drainage is functioning properly. What can go wrong, plenty!

It's important to remember that a Custom Built Home is a prototype, something that has never been built before. Even if it's a floor plan that has been constructed in the past, many of the variable are being assembled together for the very first time. It's vital for a home to have a shakedown prior to the Owners moving in. Building homes for over 30 years teaches me this lesson.

8. Establishing the finished floor elevation of the slab. This is an issue that comes up early in the building process but one of the most important. It is often said, if the foundation of a home is wrong, everything after that is a wasted effort.

The worst mistake is setting the elevation or the height of the finished floor too low. Then why don't Builders just error on setting the elevation too high? Well, it's a balance between the costs involved of raising the elevation vs. setting it too low. It has to be calculated carefully.

Other times, in Planned Communities the finished floor elevation is set by the developer, passed to the County Building Department and finally to the Builder constructing your home. Sometimes, that elevation is incorrect and it's up to an experienced Builder to figure that out. Often, the elevation provided is the pad elevation or the dirt level before the foundation is constructed, rather than the finished floor of the slab. It's up to the Home Builder to catch this.

On parcels outside Planned Communities, it's up to the Builder to hire a "Site Engineer" to design a "grading plan" that sets the finished floor elevation. Setting the slab elevation is an art, a balance between many variables..

Probably one of the most upsetting issues for a Builder is a falling out with their Homeowners. After all, the main purpose of any company is customer satisfaction. From the very first meeting until after the home is completed, all the Builders efforts are focused upon constructing a home that meets or exceeds their homeowner's expectations. Is the misunderstanding due to a a different interpretation of the plans, contract, scopes of work or perhaps a material installed is different from what was expected? In any case, it's an upsetting reality when somehow the relationship has hit a bump in the road.

At our first homeowner meeting, before a single shovel full of dirt has been turned, we ask one of the most important questions of our relationship. If we were chatting two years from now, sitting on your newly created Lanai, have a glass of iced tea, what would we have to do from this day forward to have met or exceeded your expectations?

I listen very carefully to what the owners say and follow that conversation up with an email confirming that I

understood them correctly. That conversation becomes the foundation of our path to that homeowner's satisfaction. Then we listen some more, develop a complete scope of work and building plans that includes all the features desired. Our Interior Designer with the Owner's help selects all the home's appointments from flooring to roof tile. All before a single shovel full of dirt is turned.

Emails, text messages, phone calls, site meetings followed up with emails confirming our understanding and weekly status reports all focused upon clear communications. The last thing we want is a dissatisfied Homeowner.

What Type Of Mulch Is Best?

Someone in my Orlando neighborhood asked for my opinion on mulch selection so I thought I would pass this on.

‘Hi Mike, what kind of mulch is best? We have always gotten that red mulch but want your opinion. One of my friends said cypress, the big pine bark is supposed to attract roaches, yuk - so what do you think’?

I prefer the non colored cypress mulch. It does not have dyes and mats together. I like the natural look of mulch instead of the colored type. Beyond looks, there are other issues. As I mentioned, the cypress shreds, mat together and is less likely to wash away in a hard rain.

I like the look of the pine bark and it is more environmentally friendly but, it washes away too easily. As far as bugs are concerned I think they are both susceptible to attracting bugs but that's a by-product of what mulch does. It shuts out the sunlight and makes it difficult for vegetation to grow. Since it is dark and wet, it attracts bugs. On the other hand I have not found the bugs in the mulch to be a problem.

When Can I Move Into My New Home?

As a Custom Home Builder, this is a question we often hear when building a home for a family. It makes sense because the homeowners are dealing with a lot of issues such as vacating their existing home or rental, transferring utilities, coordinating the moving company and other deadlines. The homeowners are under a great deal of pressure and so is the Builder.

As the home's delivery date approaches, the Builder is coordinating the building trades, county, bank inspections; obtaining the Certificate of Occupancy and setting the power meter on the home after all County inspections have been completed. Items that are mostly beyond the Builder's control. Most of the items that require completion are not physically obvious to the anxious homeowners. In fact it looks as though nothing is happening on their home as the delivery clock counts down.

The actual closing date may still be in question even though the Builder has been providing "weekly status reports" and daily "web camera photos" for almost a year. The Owners keep asking the Builder for a solid closing date and his answers sound circumspect because he can't be absolutely certain.

From 30+ years of experience I can tell you the worst mistake is to move into your home before it is 100% complete. It sounds like the right decision when the pressure is on but it's a mistake for the Owners as well as the Builder. Believe me, no matter how well-meaning intentions may be; it's not going to end well. Homeowner work days are lost, materials have to be ordered and trades miss appointments. If the walk through list is more than 25 items (not counting paint and drywall touch up) the house isn't ready to be turned over to the homeowners. It's better not to move in until the home is more complete.

Every Home Builder's goal should be a "zero item" walk through list with the Owners. That's not always possible but that should be the goal. A 25 item punch list or less is certainly a reasonable expectation. Obviously, the items should be minor and not "install kitchen cabinets".

Smart Builders set an appointment to complete the minor items on the walk through list 10 working days from the actual walk through. It allows enough time for the Owners to settle into their home and enough time for the Builder to order materials and schedule the proper trades for completion. The goal should be to have the workers show up on the scheduled date and finish all the items on the list.

Maintaining Your Home

I have been the owner of an upscale home for more than 20 years and a homebuilder since 1980. Below are some helpful hints to maintain your home.

Landscaping- hiring a professional landscaper is best. Mow grass, edge, weed and trim shrubs weekly. Never cut more than 1/3 of the length of the blade of grass. It puts major stress on the lawn. Sure, it's more work to cut the grass weekly during growing season but that's what it takes.

Make sure you stay on top of your landscaper to avoid a \$500-\$700 bill for "whipping" your yard into shape when you hire the new replacement company. Pay a fee each month even though there is less work to do in the winter. Winter is the time to ask your landscape company to tighten things up. In the summer, they have all they can do to stay on top of the basics. Go figure, you hire a lawn guy to work in the yard and then pay Bally to give you a work out!

Mulch- new mulch should be placed in the planting beds yearly. On a 1/4 acre lot about 15 CY's is required. I buy 200 bags of mulch (2 cu yd's each) from Home Depot (\$50 delivery charge) and ask my lawn company to install it. This way I know how much mulch was actually installed and the bags are much easier for the lawn guys to carry. You can even do it yourself if you're ambitious or decide to cancel your Bally membership.

Non-colored Cypress mulch is best (the red dye can't be good for the environment), pine bark mulch just floats away with the first rainstorm. Cypress mulch mats together and stays in place longer.

Insect control- is required 1 time per month. Most companies fertilize and perform weed control at the same time. They normally apply fertilizer and insect control by spraying. During the rainy season, ask for granulated fertilizer so it doesn't wash away with the afternoon showers. Make sure they use a leaf blower to remove the excess granular

material that lands on concrete services. Otherwise, the iron in the fertilizer leaves rust stains. It usually ends up in your pool as little orange dots!

Roof cleaning- required every 3 years. Make sure they wet down your shrubs and cover them with plastic before they start. It's smart to water your landscaping a few hours before they arrive. This keeps the shrubs and grass from absorbing their chemical mix as much. Hire a lightweight guy to walk on your roof to avoid costly roof repairs from broken roof tiles.

I cleaned the roof this last time myself. It's not for the faint at heart. I saved about 2/3 the cost an outside company would charge. I used a 10% chlorine mix that I bought at Lowe's and applied it with a lawn sprayer. Make sure you hose it off afterward. When you walk on a tile roof, always step on the tile where two pieces overlap. It's stronger there and keeps the tile from breaking. Don't forget the wear a mask as the fumes are formidable.

On second thought, hire the roof-cleaning guys. I don't want to have to take up a collection to support your wife and kids!

Exterior house cleaning- removing mold, mildew, insect nests etc. is required every two years. I know they call it pressure washing but nobody actually does that. It causes too much damage. They use chlorine to do all the cleaning and just hose it off. Have them clean the screen enclosure too.

Window washing- cleaning the inside, outside, screens and tracks is required every two years, right after the exterior house cleaning. I like to hire the same company to do both as I get a better deal. Have them do the pool deck too. They might even throw in the driveway and sidewalk cleaning if you negotiate.

Exterior painting- is required every 5-10 years. Darker colors fade out faster than lighter ones. Touching up damaged paint will extend the life of your paint job. Hire a painter (\$100) every couple of years to touch up the paint inside and outside. This will keep your home looking sharp. A

fresh coat of paint is not only attractive but a waterproofing agent too. This becomes real important during hurricane season.

Don't forget to get approval from the Home Owner's Association (HOA) if you are changing the outside color of your home. It's usually required.

Hire an interior design company to pick your exterior color palette. The difference is well worth the \$200 design fee. Make sure you apply large color swatches to the exterior first. A color can sure look different once it's applied to the wall.

Invite the HOA to give it their blessing, then paint. It sure beats an argument about who is going to pay for repainting the house with the HOA.

I bought a foreclosure from a bank recently and had trouble getting the HOA to approve my exterior colors in a timely manner. After two weeks, I finally had to paint on the front of the house, "please approve my paint colors" in very large letters! It was a miracle! I received a call approving the colors that very afternoon.

Pressure washing- concrete driveways, pavers, walks and pool decks require cleaning 1-2 times per year. You can extend the time between cleanings by applying a 10% chlorine solution with a garden sprayer. It's better to do it early in the morning before the concrete gets hot. Otherwise, it evaporates before it has time to do its job. Keep an eye on the kids because that chlorine leaves ugly white foot prints on dark green carpet!

Pool cleaning- required weekly. You can do the job yourself if you have a screen enclosure and a pool vacuum or hire a company if you don't. It's manageable if you have an enclosure. Set the clock for 8 hours in the summer and 6 after hurricane season. Once it starts raining you'll need the extra hours to manage the algae build up.

Make sure the pool guy cleans the cartridge filter weekly. Once it's full of dirt it can be cleaned with automatic dish washing liquid by soaking it in a clean trash can for a few

days. Don't let the pool guy tell you it's clogged and you need a new one! Keep cleaning it until the horizontal bands break and the pleats stick together. I have two so I can rotate one while I'm cleaning the other. I only threw one out in 10 years! I can't tell you how many I bought before I figured that one out!

Also, make the guy place the chlorine tablets in the automatic chlorinator unless you want to pay for another plastic skimmer basket. The chlorine tablets will eat right through it!

Irrigation- maintaining your irrigation system is essential for the overall health of your landscaping. Look for evidence of broken sprinkler heads (wash outs and dry patches) weekly, especially in the dry season. Remove growth from around sprinkler heads 2 times per year. It's best to do this before the growing season (March) and at the end of the season (October). Place concrete doughnuts around each head and trim grass away with a small spade shovel. Weed killer won't do the job. It's a good time to make sure the heads are adjusted properly. Don't let the water hit the house if you want to avoid mold issues! Replace the battery in the timer box too. This way the watering times will stay set even if the power goes out. Ok, when was the last time you thought of that one?

It's a good idea to give a friendly neighbor permission to water your lawn if they see your lawn dying. It might save you from replacing the entire lawn. Trust me on this one! If you can't find a neighbor that will help you out then it's time to move!

Water is the life's blood of your landscaping, especially the lawn. When it doesn't get enough water it gets stressed, then weakens. This leaves the grass susceptible to bugs and disease. It's a cascade effect so make sure you stay on top of watering. I know watering is expensive, that's why I recommend using a shallow well.

Watering- required 2 times per week for 30 minutes a zone, more or less depending upon the weather. Make sure

your rain sensor is working and just leave the timer clock set in the ON position. Water early in the morning instead of late in the evening. It helps prevent your grass from developing a fungus. If you're courageous, some people turn the irrigation system off in the rainy summer months. Better remember to turn it back on after hurricane season!

The smart move is to install a shallow well and lower your water bill to less than \$25 per month. It will be the best \$2,000 investment you ever made! You'll start saving money after 2 years. Your neighbors will always wonder why your landscaping looks better than theirs. Tell them it's like Coors Beer, it's in the water!

Handyman- stop kidding yourself that one day you will complete the "honey do" list. It's not going to happen! Wives are just built that way, so get over it. Hire a handyman to come in quarterly and keep your home running smoothly. If you don't, your new home will be falling apart before you know it. Maintaining your home will increase the value and avoid a nasty surprise when the future buyer hires a home inspector, before they close. Just keep a running list of things that need attention and have someone else take care of them while you are working. Save your free time for the family. A good handyman will save you a ton! I have a retired guy that can do anything but I'm not sharing! He even hangs the Xmas lights!

Make your wife a deal. She can have that cleaning lady if you get a handyman! Negotiate, it's a win, win!

Septic System- make sure you have a company inspect and pump out your tank every 3 years. It will save you a \$10,000 bill for replacing the drain field. Better believe me on this one! It's best to be there when they pump out your tank. Ask them how your system is doing. Just don't shake his hand! I know its gross but it's important! You need this feedback as they can tell you how healthy the septic system is by the smell. Then you can adjust how you are treating your

waste system. He can even tell you if you need to visit the doctor too! No, just kidding but he probably can.

Remind the company to clean out the filter. Can you believe you have to tell them this! Yeah, get over it, just do it!

Never flush old medications, coffee grounds or bleach down the toilet. Anything that kills the bacteria in your tank will stop your system from working. Every month, flush a whole jar of yeast down the toilet. Half on the 15th and the other half on the 30th. You want to keep the septic tank bacteria happy! They usually get unhappy just when you're having a really big party. It's not pretty! If not, buy a pair of hip waders (no, not for trout fishing).

Once a month- stand in the street outside your home and see what your neighbors see. This will avoid an embarrassing letter from the Homeowner's Association Management Company and bad feelings with neighbors. If you see something that's unsightly, so do your neighbors!

Appreciate the team it takes to keep your home beautiful. I keep a supply of \$10 Publix gift certificates on hand. It's amazing what you can accomplish with one of those babies! Before the workers start I meet each of the guys, introduce myself, ask their names and shake their hands (except for the septic guy). I thank them in advance for doing a great job and hand the boss a Publix gift certificate right in front of his men. I want happy workers giving me their best work because I'm such a great guy! I usually leave them whistling and smiling.

I hope these tips have been helpful. Many of these lessons have been learned quite painfully over the years.

Home Security

It's always easier to ask someone else to do something for you. It's more difficult to accept responsibility for your own safety and take steps to improve it. I think security begins at the front door and radiates out from there. Below, are a few ideas that you can implement to improve security without relying on the security of the neighborhood gates and walls.

Install "bump proof locks". It's something new on the radar screen that lets the crooks enter your front door in seconds without them!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr23tpWX8IM>

Lock the door between the house and the garage. Yeah, I know it's a pain in the neck but, the crooks know you don't lock it too. The garage overhead door is not tied into the security system and the garage windows and doors have probably been omitted too.

Lock the outside storage door that you leave open for the pool and landscaping man. It's the first place the crooks will look. This is how they broke into one neighbors home.

Take the time to check each of your window locks periodically. Sometimes they are left open, but it's difficult to tell as they are hidden behind the window curtains.

Lock all your doors and windows.

Turn on your alarm system.

Is your alarm system monitored by an alarm company? Who's going to call the Police for you if you don't?

Do you leave the garage remote control in a car parked in your driveway? The crooks will break into your car, press the remote button and gain access to your home through the garage. Even if you lock the garage/house door the crooks will lower the overhead door and be out of site in an instant. Then they can dynamite the door open and nobody will hear.

Sign up for a home security check through the Neighborhood Watch Program. It's free!

Key your front door differently from the other doors on your home. If you give the front door key to someone that you no longer trust, it's easy to have it re-keyed at Home Depot. Re-keying 1 door is a lot easier than 10.

Install door pins or security bars on your sliding glass doors. Every time one of my neighbors locks themselves out of their house they call me to "jimmy" open the sliding glass door. Lifting the active door panel up and down with a screw driver a few times, just below the lock, will open the door in seconds.

Add a home interior motion detector to the basic alarm package.

Without one, the crooks will just break the glass in your window or door instead of opening it and setting off the alarm.

Install motion sensor flood lights on the exterior of your home. When the crooks walk around your house looking for a way to get in they will be lit up like a Christmas tree.

Turn on your alarm at night when you are sleeping as well as when you are away.

Tell your neighbor when you are going away so they can watch your home and pick up the newspaper.

Leave a light on when you leave the house.

Install landscape lighting around the outside of your home. It looks great and the crooks will choose the darkened home every time.

Making someone else responsible for your security is like asking the Government to raise your child.

At Regal Classic Homes, we use a low voltage, security contractor to custom design a security system that matches your budget.

Pool Filter Maintenance

Tired of having your pool man say "it's time to replace your cartridge filter again"? Chaaaaccchhhing!!!

Most pool companies hose off your filter weekly as they service your pool, but never provide a deep cleaning. Without a deep cleaning, dirt particles build up and filter replacement is required. A new filter costs between \$50-\$100.

You can normally keep using a cartridge filter until the horizontal bands wear off, but they have to be deep cleaned periodically. Here's what I do with my pool filter: after the pool man services the pool and hoses off the filter, my pressure gauge on the filter tank reads about 18 PSI. When the PSI gets to 30 or better (after it's already been hosed off) it's time to take action (usually once every 3 months). You can tell your filter needs cleaning when the automatic pool cleaner stops moving around your pool at the correct speed, even though it's been recently surface cleaned.

Fill a 25 gallon garbage can with water and add 5 cups of automatic dishwashing liquid. Adding the detergent first actually works better as the water action mixes the detergent and water together. Drop in your filter and let it soak overnight. Hose off your filter the next day and you're ready to go. It's a good idea to have 2 filters so that you can rotate them as needed. The pool guys don't care much for this system as they can't sell you a new filter, but it sure saves you money. Your filter should last years!

Animals In Your attic

I recently had a real learning experience and I build custom homes for a living! After living in our Orlando home for 5 years, we heard the pitter, patter of little feet in our attic one night. Action needed to be taken before one became many. I have been through the animal trapping experience before and found the services expensive and ineffective. Many trap the animals, but do not repair the areas where the animals get in. Guess what, new ones take up residence! I decided to purchase an animal trap and fix the holes myself. Well, after a month in the trapping business here are my conclusions:

1. Any gaps larger than an inch will enable animals to get in your attic space. You know that big fluffy squirrel you see, well picture him without hair. I know it's "X" rated but that's how small a hole they can crawl into.
2. I would bet money that most of the attics (90 %) in our subdivision have animals in them. If you don't know that your attic is animal free, then you probably have attic residents. Trust me on this one!
3. In the past month I caught 1 cat, 2 possum, 2 raccoons and a squirrel. These were all caught in my back yard.
4. An animal trap costs only \$20 at Harbor Freight, and it's easy to use.
5. Fixing the holes up on the roof can mostly be repaired with rat wire and spray foam. Most handymen can handle this job.
6. Unless you protect your attic you either have animals up there or will have some visitors soon.
7. When the weather gets colder we like to stay warm inside, so do all the critters that live outside!
8. If your wife tells you she hears something in the attic, she's probably right. No, the noise is not from an animal walking on the roof tile, it's in your attic. I can

hear your wife now, “see Joe I told you we had animals!”. Thanks Mike.

9. Your neighbors are having the same problem you are. They’re just not telling you they have rats in their attic too. It’s not something most people are proud of.
10. Drive around the subdivision once, just before dark and count the number of squirrels you see. Guess what, they’re all living in your neighbor’s attics!
11. Buy a rat and a mouse trap (Publix) and use peanut butter as bait in your attic. Better nail or chain the trap down as those critters can get BIG!
12. The metal vents on your roof should all have rat wire wrapped around them. They come with a small piece of wire mesh over the opening (sometimes) to keep the animals out. Well, the animals must all be smaller in China where they make the vents as I hear the people eat the bigger ones. That little piece of wire mesh won’t keep healthy Orlando animals out of your attic!
13. Next time you’re out walking around your house, take a look at your aluminum soffit. Follow it down until you are looking at the spot where the soffit meets the roof tile. You’ll see a little gap (yeah, it’s right at the “V”) where they meet (unless, a raccoon has already lifted it up with his back to make the opening bigger for his family). The builders leave it there so the animals have a way of staying warm in the winter. I guess it’s a Green Building feature. Stuff rat wire into that opening and spray foam it in place. If you just use foam without the wire the animals will dig it out and get back in. You have to use rat wire with the foam.
14. If you find you have company in your attic, set traps in your back yard for a week or two. Then plug up all the holes on your roof you can find. Set traps in your attic with peanut butter bait (yeah, I know “Jiff” it’s not just for kids). Then wait... Don’t worry; your wife will let

you know if you still have critters. They can hear them because they don't have to deal with the problem! If you're lucky you've gotten them all! If not, you will start to smell something that reminds you of your gym locker back in high school. It's not a good sign! Yeah, I know, only your wife can smell it! Resist your wife's demands that you go up in the attic on a wild goose chase with flashlight in hand. You won't find anything! Tell your wife to get some potpourri and open it in the room where she thinks she smells something. Wait it out. The smell will go away in about a week. Better get this all done before the holidays when your mother in law comes to visit! They will definitely have you outnumbered. Happy hunting! I hope this helps out.

At Regal Classic Homes, we incorporate various techniques to prevent animals from entering your Orlando, new custom home, addition or remodel.

Keep An Eye On Your Grass

Early spring is the time of the year to really keep an eye on your lawn. Temperatures are rising, once a week water restrictions are still in effect and the spring rains have yet to start. A perfect storm guaranteed to kill your lawn!

The grass gets that unusual blue green look or worse, brown spots, indicating the grass is thirsty for water. That first indicator, the blue green look, is actually the underside of the grass blade. As it wilts, due to lack of water, the grass blade turns over.

Make sure your irrigation timer is turned on, each zone set for 30 minutes and programmed for the correct watering day. It's also a great time to change the back-up battery.

The battery allows the timer to hold your program settings if the power goes off. This is rather inconvenient if you're out of town. Sure way to burn up your lawn! Without the battery, the timer switches to a default setting. The grass still gets water but not nearly enough for this time of year. You think everything is great until its too late!

Lack of water puts the grass under stress. This opens it up to all kinds of issues, fungus, weeds and insect infestations. It's much cheaper to maintain a healthy lawn than it is to whip it back into shape or replace it.

If you have dry patches and violating the water restrictions is not an option, you are allowed to hand water. I recently discovered a really handy gadget at Home Depot. It's a timer that hooks up to an outside hose bib. Just screw it on to the valve, connect hose, set the required time and water away. It's less than \$15 and will water up to a maximum of 2 hours. It's real handy for topping off your pool water too, just set an go.

Air Conditioner Filters

The Thin Kind (1")

Most custom homes have one or more air conditioning units. Many require odd sized filters that have to be custom made for your unit. They can be expensive and inconvenient to order.

The WEB Company has the solution. For less than \$20 you can buy a filter that can be hosed off and used again. I'm not talking about the cheap ones that don't filter anything, this is a great filter.

The Thick Kind (5")

Trane also make a great washable filter that is 5" thick and does a wonderful job filtering the air. Your unit has to be built for this kind of filter when originally installed. They cost around \$50 each.

http://www.trane.com/content/dam/Trane/residential/downloads/brochure/aircleaners/72-1007-11_TR%20Perfect%20Fit%20Consumer%20Brochure_ReadOnly.pdf

Customer Care Procedure

The Builder you select should have a customer service program in the event service is required during your warranty period. Below is the service procedure for Regal Classic Homes.

REGULAR SERVICE

In order for Regal Classic Homes to service your home in the most efficient manner under your homeowner's warranty, please use the following procedure for all service requests outside of those defined as an emergency.

Step 1: Submit all requests in writing to:
buildr4u@aol.com

Step 2: Upon receiving your service request you will be contacted to set up a service inspection.

Step 3: During the service inspection, a future date will be set for the appropriate trades to perform the work.

Appliances

Every appliance furnished with your new home is warranted by the manufacturer. If any service is required, phone the appliance dealer directly.

Aggressive Appliance: 407-295-4489

EMERGENCY SERVICE

An emergency is classified as items which endangers your new home or the lives of your family members. If an EMERGENCY does occur the following numbers should be used:

Air Conditioning / Heating

Certified Mechanical - 407-294-6324

Electrical

A & B Electric - 407-293-5984 x 0

Plumbing

Certified Plumbing - 407-294-8900

If for any reason you are unable to obtain emergency service from the above numbers please leave a message at the number below and your call will be returned as soon as possible.

407-291-6740

Please note that the above numbers should only be used when an emergency such as a loss of heat or air conditioning, electrical problem, or major plumbing deficiency occurs during or after regular business hours. They are not to be used to report general warranty items (Police or fire emergencies should always be phoned directly to the local authorities listed below.)

Fire 911

Police 911

Hospital----

Utilities

New homeowners must notify the utility companies that service is to be continued in their names; otherwise service will be discontinued the day after mortgage closing. Also, call these numbers in case of emergency.

Power_____

Telephone_____

Sewer_____

Water_____

U.S. Postal Service_____

Trash Collection_____

Cable TV_____

Call the following subcontractors / suppliers for a more in depth orientation on special features of your home.

Randy Suggs Landscaping & Irrigation: 407-556-8835

Smart House: 407-467-6316

Other Phone numbers for your convenience:

Florida Home Carpets (Flooring): 407-366-5646

T Squared Kitchen & Bath (Cabinets): 407-290-2720

Aggressive Appliances: 407-295-4489

Jose Cuellar Painting: 321-239-2684

