

HOMING SENSE

JUDGING BY HOW it has rallied since the economic downturn, this summer reaching its highest level of starts in nearly seven years (according to RBC), homebuilding may be among Alberta's most adaptive industries. With provincial fortunes so closely aligned to a volatile commodity like oil, what choice do designers and builders have? Economic ebb and flow isn't the only challenge: style trends fluctuate as much as oil prices. Here we ask three experts about the past, present and future of Alberta homes and the business of making them.

— Scott Messenger

JEREMY WALTER
(Architectural Technology '03)
Founder and Principal Designer
Boss Design

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHANGE IN THE HOUSING INDUSTRY SINCE THE DOWNTURN?

The client is looking for improved quality and unique ideas to be incorporated into their home. During the height of the boom it was basically slam things out as fast as you could, from the building perspective.

WHAT'S HOT IN TERMS OF DESIGN TRENDS?

There are two. The first is "prairie" style, based on an architectural style created by Frank Lloyd Wright. That's defined by very clean lines, a very square, linear look, really low slope on the roof, wide overhangs and uses of materials in a panelized [way]. The second style that's very popular is the modern style. [That's] a blend of flat roofs and materials that [are used] in commercial applications. You see a lot of steel, wood panelling, metal siding, lots of stucco and big expanses of commercial glass, floor to ceiling.

IF YOU COULD LIVE IN ANY FAMOUS HOME WHICH WOULD IT BE?

Fallingwater. It was designed by Wright [in Pennsylvania in 1935]. It's cantilevered over a small stream and waterfall. He was doing things that no one else knew how to do. My favourite thing is to take one of his styles and represent it to the best of our ability while also incorporating new technologies, new materials and new thinking.

KLINT LANGSTAFF
(Architectural Technology '99)
Owner/Operator
Lang Built Homes

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHANGE IN THE INDUSTRY SINCE THE DOWNTURN?

The structuring of subdivisions is a lot more mixed density. A lot of the communities being built go from row housing to apartment buildings to single detached. The developers and community have accepted this. This is the way to prevent urban sprawl and make prices a little more attractive to the entry market.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR YOU AS AN OPERATOR?

It's going to be getting labour and competitive pricing. With the labour shortage we're experiencing, prices just continue to go up.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF THE JOB?

Meeting with clients, coming up with a design that works for them and having a project complete and landscaped - seeing the architecture come together and seeing a happy client.

TREVOR HOOVER
(Architectural Technology '89)
Senior Designer
Habitat Studio

WHAT DEFINES VALUE IN A NEW HOME THESE DAYS?

For us, the philosophy is that design is your major value. The majority of people ... pick a builder, a floor plan, an elevation, carpet colour and, boom, they're done. But if you talk to those people, there will always be something wrong with that house. Sometimes they can't explain it, sometimes they can: "Oh, we don't even use our formal dining room but it was there so we live with it." We make no compromises, so each house fits that client 100 per cent.

IS THERE A DESIGN ELEMENT YOU DON'T MISS?

The dining room. Why do you need a formal dining room? My in-laws have [one]. I've known them for 25 years and I've never eaten in that dining room. It's a poor use of space.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY?

Right now it looks very positive. My theory is that it will depend on what happens with the oil industry. If we get the pipeline over to B.C. and the pipeline down to Texas, that will change our province dramatically - we will be busy. When you're having to build those projects and produce enough oil to go down those pipelines you need people and people means families, families mean schools, means subdivisions, means homes.



JEREMY WALTER



KLINT LANGSTAFF



TREVOR HOOVER

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