

FAIRFIELD COUNTY HOME



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IN THE FIELD



ARCHITECTS

Four Prominent Architects from Fairfield County

Story by Ann Sample

At a time when developers who do not possess architectural degrees build the majority of new homes and impact the look of residential construction, we decided to sit down with four prominent architects to discuss the state of home building and their profession. The architects at our roundtable discussion were Norwalk's Roger Bartels, AIA, Greenwich's Richard Kotz, AIA, Westport's George Dumitru, AIA and Weston's Jonathan Wagner, AIA.

According to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), about eighty percent of new homes are built by developers and twenty percent are built by homeowners who generally hire help: either developers or architects. "There aren't exact figures on how many homes are built by developers or homeowners without an architect," says Gopaul Ahluwalia, the Research Economist of the NAHB, "but a lot of developers buy architectural plans and modify them rather than hiring an architect."

The professionals interviewed for this article estimate that in Fairfield County architects are responsible for about 15 percent of new constructions while the national average is about five percent. Since the birth of mass-produced housing by William Levitt in the mid-20th century, some developers have been accused of building generic, poorly constructed homes.

Architects are accustomed to getting the lower share of the market but it doesn't mean they are all happy about it or its impact on the landscape. The architects interviewed acknowledge that not all developers are churning out badly designed homes. They have had successful working relationships with them. "I have worked with several developers who have a keen sense of design," says Kotz. "I enjoyed the product they produced. Many have a sensitivity to design. They add their name to the projects and want to be proud of them."

Wagner thinks the problem with some developers' homes is that they are built to sell, not custom designed for a specific client. "If you build to sell you are building a home without a soul," says Wagner. "The home has no personality. Architects try to create

homes that possess the spirit of the clients. The best developers' homes I've seen have been built for a client or the developer designs it as if it is for himself. Those homes are not generic."

Although the architects who participated in our roundtable discussion have all built their share of over-4,000 square foot homes for clients, some of them are opposed to the stereotypical developers' McMansion which are generally described as excessively large, and poorly proportioned and detailed. They believe the bigger is better trend is become passé.

"The trick to a well designed home is proportion," says Dumitru. "Architects are trained to understand proportion and how it relates to human scale. When designing a home the emphasis should be on quality not quantity."

Bartels agrees. "People haven't changed in size so why are homes getting so much larger and ceiling heights so much taller," he says. "Homes should be designed in human scale."

When Wagner saw a developer buy an old home in Westport, he says he offered to draw plans that would save yet update the older home. Wagner says that offer was refused by the builder because he

believed remodeling the home would be too much work. Wagner, the former President of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), also sits on the board of the local Aspetuck Land Trust. "I see my role as an architect to preserve and create beautiful things," he says. "Be that an antique home or piece of the Connecticut landscape."

As the older homes that possess fine, hand-crafted details are demolished and replaced by new, hastily produced larger homes with high price tags, antique homes are devalued while an aura of prestige and affluence is associated with the new homes. Over time, the McMansions' high prices change what some people perceive as desirable.

"Affluence is killing the New England landscapes," says Dumitru. "People are buying old homes and ripping them down to build McMansions. It's one thing to rip down a poorly constructed home from the 1950s and another to destroy a beautiful antique home."



worked with before will match in personality," says Dumitru.

What comes across strongly when speaking with these men is that architecture is more than their profession. It's their passion, possibly their obsession. "I knew I wanted to be an architect from the time I was a boy playing with Lincoln Logs," says Kotz. For Bartels, it was early experience designing and building tree houses which was reinforced while in college studying to be a civil engineer. Wagner thinks it is simply in his genes: his grandfather was an architect and his father the editor of Architectural Record. Dumitru reminisced about childhood sketches and fort building. These men are lucky to have known at a young age what they were destined to do. The satisfaction they feel today is evident. "The best feeling is driving by a house you designed after it has been completed," says Dumitru. "There are kids playing in the yard. You remember when you first sat down with a blank piece of paper. For me, it's a tremendous personal and emotional reward." ■

Writer Ann Sample lives in Wilton, CT and is the author of *New Space, Old World Charm* (McGraw-Hill, 2004).

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