

Historic impressions

The pale yellow home looks old, yet inside, life is all about modern conveniences, four kitchens and one amazing wine cellar

Sheila Brady

The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, February 17, 2007

Local historical societies should become more flexible by permitting the use of modern materials that look as good as natural materials, yet last far longer, says a Florida renovator.

Stephen and Paul Gidus, owners of PSG Construction in Orlando, were hampered by "antiquated" city regulations in their efforts to save a 1909 bungalow riddled by termites and ruined by commercial renovators.

However, the brothers, who were part of the Renewed American Home project at last week's International Home Builders' Show here, didn't have time to argue. They faced a tight timeline to lift and move the bungalow -- and then lift and move it a second time -- before even starting dramatic renovations that would be seen by thousands of inquiring eyes.

Initially, plans called for demolition of the desolate bungalow, one of the oldest houses in the Lake Eola Historic District in downtown Orlando. It was rotting, and the rooms had been broken into a warren of offices for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orlando, then left vacant.

Plus, it was sitting on land slated for the New American Home, the star of the massive five-day show, which attracts thousands of builders and suppliers from across North America every year.

However, Orlando is dedicated to preserving Lake Eola's historic roots, which date back to 1909 when modest wood homes were built in a jumble of appealing styles close to the shady sidewalks.

After negotiations between the city and builders, there came a solution: There would be two showhomes on the site. There would be tight controls on the front and exterior of the 1909 bungalow, but looser controls on the back and newer portion of the little house.

The New American Home is 100-per-cent new, a wildly modern interpretation of architecture in the old neighbourhood. A few feet away, the Renewed American Home is now 85-per-cent new, bigger than its concrete sibling and worth \$3.15 million U.S. The New American Home is also on the bloated Orlando market, with an asking price of \$2.95 million U.S.

"The aim was to renovate an older Florida home, respecting the traditions, but with all the modern conveniences inside," said Stephen Gidus during the official opening of the house, which more than tripled

in size when the renovators extended it back 80 feet on the skinny lot.

"We were only able to save some of the framing and roof," said Gidus. The cyprus wood siding was rotting with termites, so the brothers took pieces of it to designers at Georgia Pacific to come up with an exact profile in a termite-proof composite. Then they took the pale yellow planking to Orlando's Historical Preservation Board, expecting it would be quickly approved.

They were turned down.

"You can't tell the difference between the cyprus and the composite," said Gidus, clearly exasperated. "The manufacturer even put in brushstrokes. This is a better product and doesn't need to be painted.

"This is a case where the regulations were written in the '50s and are badly outdated because today's materials did not exist." He said the original part of the house is now covered in new cyprus wood that will have to be painted in five years and which is susceptible to termites and rot. The back half of the home is covered in the composite.

The historical board also turned down a request to use vinyl and wood windows that were also historically correct. "The board insisted we use wooden sash windows that will not stand up the weather," said Gidus.

"I believe their regulations are antiquated and they should be rewritten. The whole point is to have materials that look historically correct, but can also protect the environment and last longer." He said members of the historical board regularly drove by during construction and are "thrilled with the results."

The Gidus brothers worked with Florida architect Karen Kassik to restore the inside of the original 2,400-square-foot home.

The architectural team went down to ground zero, digging a new foundation that evolved into a 1,400-square-foot basement -- unique in Orlando because of the city's high water table. A safe room designed to withstand the hurricanes doubles as a pantry. There is also a wine cellar with room for 1,500 bottles, a workout room, laundry room and a family room with the prerequisite large plasma television.

On the main floor, architects respected the home's heritage factor by adding a large front porch. They re-created the feeling of traditional living in the front dining and living rooms by using heavy moulding and oversized panelling on the walls.

A wide hallway looks past the new side stairs and fancy stainless-steel kitchen into an oversized family room that is more 2007 than old Florida. In fact, the original house ends at the edge of the new granite counter in the main floor kitchen, said Gidus. "We wanted a comfortable home with an old feel."

Hidden behind the walls are smart wiring, icynene insulation and water-saving systems that vaulted the home to an Energy Star rating.

The original house stretched back 40 feet and the expansion added another 40 feet of living on two levels and two satellite kitchens, including one on the second floor and in the basement. There is even a full kitchen in the nanny suite above the detached garage.

"The renovation makes financial sense, but I would have likely dropped one or two of the four kitchens and the \$12,000 fire-sprinkler system," said Gidus.

He would keep the nanny suite because it provides extra rental revenue for buyers stretching their budget.

There has been lots of interest in this new-old home, but no buyers yet. "The home appeals to a very small, but viable part of the market," said Gidus.

© The Ottawa Citizen 2007

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.