

## House of the Future? Builders Show Off Ideas at Trade Show

By June Fletcher

What sort of lessons can a so-called "concept" house teach us?

At the International Builders Show, the country's largest trade event for the housing industry, it's hard to tell -- at least when it comes to the two major concept houses debuting at the Orlando, Fla., event.

Co-sponsored by Builder magazine and the National Council of the Housing Industry/Supplier 100, a building products manufacturing group, the two houses sit side-by-side in downtown Orlando and showcase what's trendy in both new and remodeled homes. The sponsors and the local builders who produced them say that the houses are meant to be showcases of new products and building techniques. Visiting builders are encouraged to try building these homes in their own markets.

Both of these houses are so fantastical, and their stories so idiosyncratic, that it's hard to know what lessons can be taken away. In fact, after touring them, I was left with more questions than answers.

Take, for instance, their price tags. The Renewed American Home -- a remodel of a 1909 bungalow -- is currently on the market for \$2.9 million, while the New American Home is for sale at \$3.15



The remodel of the 1909 bungalow -- on the market for \$2.9 million.

million. Both houses were constructed with hundreds of thousands of dollars of donated materials, fixtures and appliances, so their prices don't reflect their true market value. How is a builder supposed to figure out how to reproduce a look if he doesn't know what it costs?

Then there's the question of questionable design. The New American Home, a blend of Craftsman and urban-chic styling, is glitzy, with metallic glass tiles, walls that slide on tracks, and steel-cable stair railings. But the floor plan is puzzling: The living room and dining room are on the third floor, the master suite is on the second, and the two secondary bedrooms, office, home theater, wet bar and laundry are on the first (thank goodness there's an elevator). Why is this inverted plan better than a more traditional one? Would anyone want to drag groceries up three floors to the kitchen or have an office next to a theater? And who really wants to take a shower in a glass-walled room overlooking an open balcony, directly facing the windows of the building across the

street?

And finally, there's the question of originality -- or lack thereof. The 1909 bungalow was moved to a lot two doors down from its original spot to make room for the New American Home. The bungalow's space was expanded from 2,460 to 5,439 square feet, and its interior was gutted to make room for a wider staircase, wheelchair-accessible bath, new staircase and other features. Older materials were replaced with new: engineered wood for the floors, solid surfacing for the countertops, laminate for the cabinetry. Can such a thoroughly revised house really be called "renewed?" And if it was in such bad shape to begin with, and not worth preserving for its historical or architectural significance, why not just tear it down and start afresh?

Questions, questions: And I always thought the point of show houses was to provide answers.

*-- June Fletcher is a staff reporter at The Wall Street Journal and the author of "House Poor" (Harper Collins, 2005). Her "House Talk" column appears most Mondays on RealEstateJournal.com. [Email your questions](#) about the residential real-estate market. Please include your name, city and state. If you don't want your name used in our column, please indicate that. Due to volume of mail received, we regret that we cannot answer every question.*

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*-- February 09, 2007*