

Custom Builder[®]

NOVEMBER 2010

INSPIRING BUSINESS AND DESIGN EXCELLENCE

The Infill Crowd

04

4 Custom Builders Get Creative with Infill Sites

the infill crowd

Infill sites in established neighborhoods demand creativity in design, engineering, and construction — and custom builders are rising to the challenge.

By Susan Body, Contributing Editor



Almost all custom home builders get a portion — if not all — of their business from scattered-site infill properties, but in recent years that business has been growing. “The economy today dictates what we can and cannot do,” says Lou Beaudet, a partner with BRG Custom Homes in Southfield, Mich. “Infill is certainly the way to go.”

With the aging of suburban housing stock in major metropolitan areas like Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, opportunity has come knocking for high-end custom builders. This is particularly true in the South Bay, part of the southwest peninsula of Los Angeles County that stretches along Santa Monica Bay. “There’s been a tremendous amount of construction here because the land value is so great and the homes are reaching the end of their useful life,” says Chris Kempel of Rockefeller Partners Architects, El Segundo, Calif. “We’re talking prime locations with junker buildings on them.”

Affluent homeowners can snap up choice lots at reasonable prices, and they’re showing a preference for older neighborhoods over new subdivisions. “Custom home subdivisions are very nice, but there’s not a lot of landscaping yet and the trees aren’t mature,” says Beaudet. Established, upscale neighborhoods have a cachet new developments lack, and they’re close to good schools, public transportation, shopping, and other amenities.

Like homeowners who decide to remodel instead of move, tear-down/rebuild clients see the value of investing in their land and community. That trend is likely to continue until the real estate market stabilizes, says Mark Farrahar of Castle Rock Construction, Lake Zurich, Ill. “Until land prices adjust, people will be looking to build new homes on sites where they have an equity stake,” Farrahar says.

Each of the infill sites described in the following pages offered unique opportunities and challenges. As you’ll see, the designs are just as spectacular.

infill construction



Project: 33rd Street residence
Location: Manhattan Beach, Calif.
Square footage: 4,500
Designer/architect: Rockswold Partners Architects, El Segundo, Calif.
Builder: Wilson Construction, Los Angeles, Calif.
Photos: Eric Staudemair

Bali modern on the beach

Influenced by the architecture of Bali and Tahiti, this Manhattan Beach, Calif., home maintains a serene presence in a dense neighborhood. It replaces a 1930s beach bungalow that was sorely in need of repair.

The overriding goal was to capitalize on views of the Pacific Ocean and Malibu coastline. But the challenges were daunting: a tight building envelope (30 by 60 feet); a 30-foot height restriction; a 6-foot slope across the width of the site; 3-foot setbacks on each side; and the city's open-space requirement.

Architect Chris Kempel says the clients wanted to convey the stylistic flavor of Bali and Tahiti, where they often vacationed. "The term we coined was 'Bali modern,'" says Kempel. "It informed every decision we made, from the woods we selected to the finishes and the shape of the roof."

About a dozen species of wood were used including western cedar

siding, Honduran mahogany doors and windows, dark-stained oak, teak, koa, and zebrawood. Builder Jeff Wilson crafted a bathroom vanity out of monkey pod, a durable, eco-friendly hardwood.

Kempel maximized the site's buildable area with a 4,500-square-foot design that has two levels plus a basement. At the core is a 10x14-foot Zen garden with a stone fountain and wood deck. "It's a quiet place in the womb of the house," he says. The main living areas are on the top floor, where full-height glass provides unobstructed views of the ocean. Bedrooms are on the second level, with the master suite at the front of the home. The front entrance is also on this level.

On the basement level, which is partly above ground, is a three-car, rear-loaded garage, a home office that faces the street, and a front room called the beach room. "Some shoring was required in order to add this level," says Wilson. "We had to lower the grade and build retaining walls."



infill construction



Project: August residence
Location: Bloomfield Township, Mich.
Square footage: 4,500
Designer/architect: Dominick Tringali Architects, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.
Builder: BRG Custom Homes, Southfield, Mich.
Photos: James Halber Photography

Early American classic

When Jim and Susannah Bowers tore down their 61-year-old home in Winchester, Mass., they considered stick-building a new home on the site. But after getting a few quotes from architects, they found another option that better fit their budget.

Connor Homes in Middlebury, Vt., designs, cuts, and pre-assembles many architectural elements, such as wall sections, entryways, cornices, returns, and rake overhangs, in their Middlebury shop. The company specializes in architecturally correct reproductions of traditional styles such as Georgian, Greek revival, Cape, saltbox, and shingle style.

"We loved the style of architecture, the attention to detail, and the top-quality craftsmanship," says Jim Bowers. "We also recognized that their process achieves economies of scale by leveraging the factory setting. The quality and [potential] savings added up to a great value."

A Connor design called the Walter Edgecomb House was the starting point for the Bowers home. The Edgecomb is a Georgian-style home with a wide front porch, a Palladian window, and heavy period trim such as fluted corner pilasters and dentil moldings. Jim and Susannah worked with Connor architect Avery Hamilton and Gail Rice, director of business development, to adapt the Edgecomb

to their specifications. The couple owned a 1/3-acre lot on a cul-de-sac with an unusual, almost L-shaped footprint. Setbacks limited the buildable area, and there were some grading issues.

Hamilton scaled down the original plan from 4,740 to 3,500 square feet. Instead of a tuck-under garage, which would have detracted from the home's curb appeal, the garage was placed 6 feet below grade and facing the street. Jim and Susannah also re-configured the room layout, opened up the kitchen to the family room, enlarged the master suite, put the laundry room upstairs, and added a back porch.

The new home looks like an old home that has been added onto over time, says Hamilton. "It's not a vanilla box — it's very ornate. The library has a coffered ceiling and the stair hall has custom newel posts and elliptical archways." **CB**



Project: Bowers residence
Location: Winchester, Mass.
Square footage: 3,500
Designer/architect: Avery Hamilton, Connor Homes, Middlebury, Vt.
Builder: Baldwin Homes, Stoughton, Mass.
Photos: Connor Homes/connorbuilding.com

Contemporary farmhouse

This home is located in an upscale Detroit suburb, but is reminiscent of a Bucks County, Pa., farmhouse. “The clients wanted a home that would respect the neighborhood,” says architect J.R. Ruthig, whose three-level design appears to be no more than 1½ stories from the street. “We kept a lot of the traditional massing of a farmhouse, breaking it down with a detached garage that is connected by a breezeway with a mudroom and laundry room.”

At one end of the lot, a steep grade drops 50 feet to a river. Ruthig backed the house up to the grade to take advantage of the views. The homeowners enjoy the scenery from a wood deck that is completely cantilevered by braced cedar beams.

Builder Lou Beaudet recalls that some drastic structural engineering was required to accommodate retaining walls that were integral to the site: “Where the house

ended, the foundation continued to serve as a retaining wall. There are walkouts on both sides.”

Although the metal roof and white vertical board-and-batten siding are pure farmhouse, the windows tell a contemporary story. A mix of white single- and double-hung windows and black frameless windows create a sharp, clean look that is carried inside with simple interior trim and a soft color palette of whites, grays and black accents. The clients wanted the home to age with them, so it had to be flexible.

“There are integrated areas on the main floor and second floor,” says Ruthig. “For instance, there’s a pocket of office off the family room that is being used as a homework center but could also serve as a workstation or craft area. Over the garage is an additional 500 to 600 square feet that could be turned into nanny’s quarters or a studio or a place for the kids to hang out when they’re older.”



French Country comfort

The 80x300-foot lot was big for the Chicago suburb of Arlington Heights, Ill., and too good for builder/designer Mark Farrahar’s clients to pass up. They wanted a 5,000-square-foot, French Country-style home with a side-loaded garage, a first-floor guest suite, and a home office that was separated from the kitchen and other living areas.

Because there are smaller one-story homes on either side of the property, Farrahar wanted to avoid a two-story front elevation. “I kept the front of the house as low as possible so it doesn’t appear too straight and vertical, and added a wing wall to make it look wider, like a ranch.”

Bedrooms are on the second floor. There’s also a basement with an English-style pub, media room, recreation room, and craft room. The staircase accesses all three levels and opens up to the rear of the home. “You can look down from the second floor all the way to the basement,” he says. The one thing the home doesn’t have is a living room. “The clients didn’t want one, so we used that square footage for the guest suite.”

Farrahar says getting around to the back of the house was a challenge because the setbacks are so narrow. “A lot of materials had to be brought in by hand,” he says. “Essentially we planned it from the back forward.”

The biggest issue concerned the neighbor to the left of his clients’ home. “She was getting water in her backyard from this property. The village made it clear that we had to address that issue early on.” He built up the grade to create a swale and installed a drainage system to control runoff from the roof, patio, and driveway.



Project: Private residence
Location: Arlington Heights, Ill.
Square footage: 5,000
Builder/designer: Castle Rock Construction, Lake Zurich, Ill.
Photos: Castle Rock Construction