

You won't find a cookie cutter in the craftsman's toolbox. With enduring architectural knowledge, skills and integrity, these specialized tradesmen return quality to home building.

Return of the Craftsman

BY MICHAEL FRERKING



Chris Kowalski, master carpenter, on roof frame.

Birth of the Subdivision

The industrial revolution changed much in the United States. One major change was mass production. Products - all the same - could be created and packaged in the thousands, if not millions. This meant monetary savings for citizens. It also meant the art of the craftsman began to disappear. Why spend money for one handmade ceramic bowl when they could buy twenty all "perfectly" made?

This situation was the same in home building. Because time and money could be saved in the same manner as in the factory, the dream of owning one's own three-bedroom, two-car garage, white-picket-fenced home for those 2.4 children became reasonable. The subdivision - America's new way of life - was born. With multiples of the same home built over and over, tradesmen could move from one house to the next doing the exact same thing, saving the buyer money. Was quality sacrificed in the name of quantity and the dollar? You bet.

With progress there is always an unforeseen downside. As carpenters, plumbers and electricians moved from home to home doing the same thing over and over, boredom and lack of personal satisfaction set in as they did among factory workers. No longer was the craftsman, the person with years of experience and skill who used wisdom to create, required. Nor was he or she valued as a truly cre-

ative person with hard-earned skills. Instead, it was production, the faster the better.

The result: most who work in the building trades feel detached from their work. It is simply a job, a paycheck, not something in which they generally take pride. Most general contractors say keeping good people is difficult. Some aren't very skilled. No one stays put; no one seems to feel pride of workmanship. This carries over into the kind of homes being built. We value low-cost, quick production and disposability over the time-honored values of thoughtful design, competent building skills and durability, much less sustainability.

Architecture: The Greek Historical Perspective

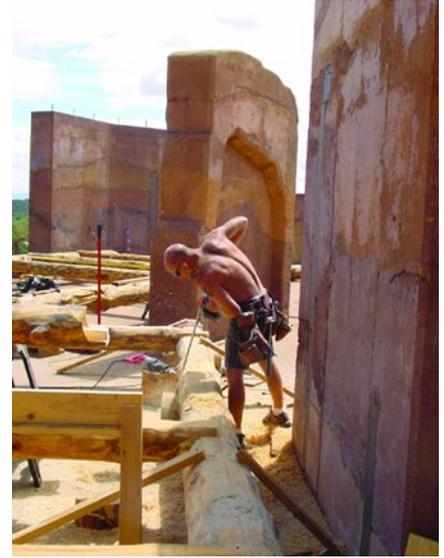
The ancient Greeks considered architecture the highest technical art. Architecture included design and building, and incorporated fundamental, guiding philosophical principles - ideal truths such as



Pumping poured earth walls.



Pouring earth with pump equipment.



Removing bark from pine poles.

***We witnessed a home built on time
and on budget that raised even the
installation of insulation to a high art.***

beauty, symmetry and balance – into Greek lives. Architectural endeavors were undertaken by craftsmen who had the knowledge and skills to translate conceptual ideals into realities, into buildings as elegant and fine as the Parthenon.

Though Western civilization began with the Greeks, it has changed – progressed – through time. There are things we can learn from a look back. The art of the craftsman is one. Can we re-think structures in terms of classical ideals and build in a more balanced manner? Can we instill that sense of pride of knowledge and skill in today's trades? We'd create interesting, sustainable, intrinsically beautiful communities, cities and homes while reasserting a sense of admiration for those who undertake the job of creating structures out of earth's materials.

A Glimpse at What May Be

As my wife and I began the process of building our home last year, we knew we needed to find people in the trades – plumbers, electricians, carpenters, etc. – who were up for a challenge. Our home

was not cookie cutter. More, it incorporated commercial building aspects and was located on a difficult site.

From day one of bidding, we could tell if tradesmen were up to the challenge. If they looked at plans from the typical production standpoint, they saw complexity and became negative. If they looked at it as a challenge, something different and creative, they gave a positive response. The decision seemed to hinge on whether they were up for something different, for using their heads and skills.

With a little patience, we put together a team of folks who viewed our project as one in which their skills and knowledge were valued. There were times when things got rough. In general, our experience was that ideals of the craftsman came alive and ideas, creativity and problem-solving skills were appreciated. Without the critical participation of our skilled and knowledgeable rough-and-finish carpenter, our house would have gone over budget and off schedule. Instead, our home was built on time and on budget and raised even insulation installation to high art. We extended thanks to those who worked with us as craftsmen (and, of course, craftswomen) for a job very well done.

This illustrates that though much today is in production style, we don't have to lose the craftsman. We need to value those with skills and ingenuity in building and give them their due. It is not simply a paycheck. It is life's work and it has intrinsic value. ☺

EcoZene is a collaboration of Northern AZ. Zene Magazine and architect Michael Frerking. Send comments to: michael@michaelfrerking.com (www.michaelfrerking.com). For more information about becoming a sponsor of EcoZene, please call 928-443-9112