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OMEGA ARCHITECTURAL GROUP, INC. IS IT "PRODUCTION" OR "CUSTOM" HOUSING?

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Over the past several years, production housing design has made a dramatic shift from standardized practicality with little architectural distinction to an approach of creating homes and neighborhoods with distinguished character. Currently there exists a large market of discerning home buyers seeking a higher quality of life that is reflected in the homes they buy. These home buyers need the affordability provided by production housing but want the look and feel of a custom home.

Some might say that anything can be built and sold in this flourishing housing market. But it is our experience that the housing product designed and built expressing the qualities of a custom home will generate waiting lists for potential home buyers—and with very little merchandising

required. The line between "production" and "custom" housing is becoming increasingly blurred.

Recent articles in the Architect's Forum have focused on quality of life and livability issues in the planning of new neighborhoods and communities. Achieving the optimal community that incorporates these planning ideals requires an intimate relationship between the land planning vision and the housing product provided by the home builder. There are many planned developments in Northern California offering exciting potential for production home building with a custom flair.

These developments are reaching into the foothills with dynamic contour, large open space and expansive views. The resulting mix of upslope, downslope, and level home designs inherently creates a custom neighborhood feeling. While it can be a challenge incorporating traditional production methods that are flexible enough to accommodate all of this variety, with good coordination

between land planning, civil engineering, and architecture, production home builders can successfully build these "custom" type homes.

Another inherent "customizing" advantage hillside lots offer is the opportunity to design floorplan layouts that are quite distinct from the traditional level lot floorplan. Contextual elements such as light, wind and views are given consideration in the location of rooms, placement of windows and design of exterior decks. These houses also require a careful integration of architecture and landscape design to deal with the contour changes in both hardscape and planting areas. This also serves to further differentiate one house from another.

Even the classic "level lot" subdivision is now being looked at with a custom perspective. Developments putting great care and emphasis into the design of the street scene will achieve a custom impression that generates excellent sales. The various architectural styles in a community, while each being distinctive, must blend

Featured below is Muirfield at Serrano "Residence One" by Lucas & Mercier Development. Architecture © Omega Architectural Group, Inc. of Benicia. Photo © Craig Cozart of Alamo.



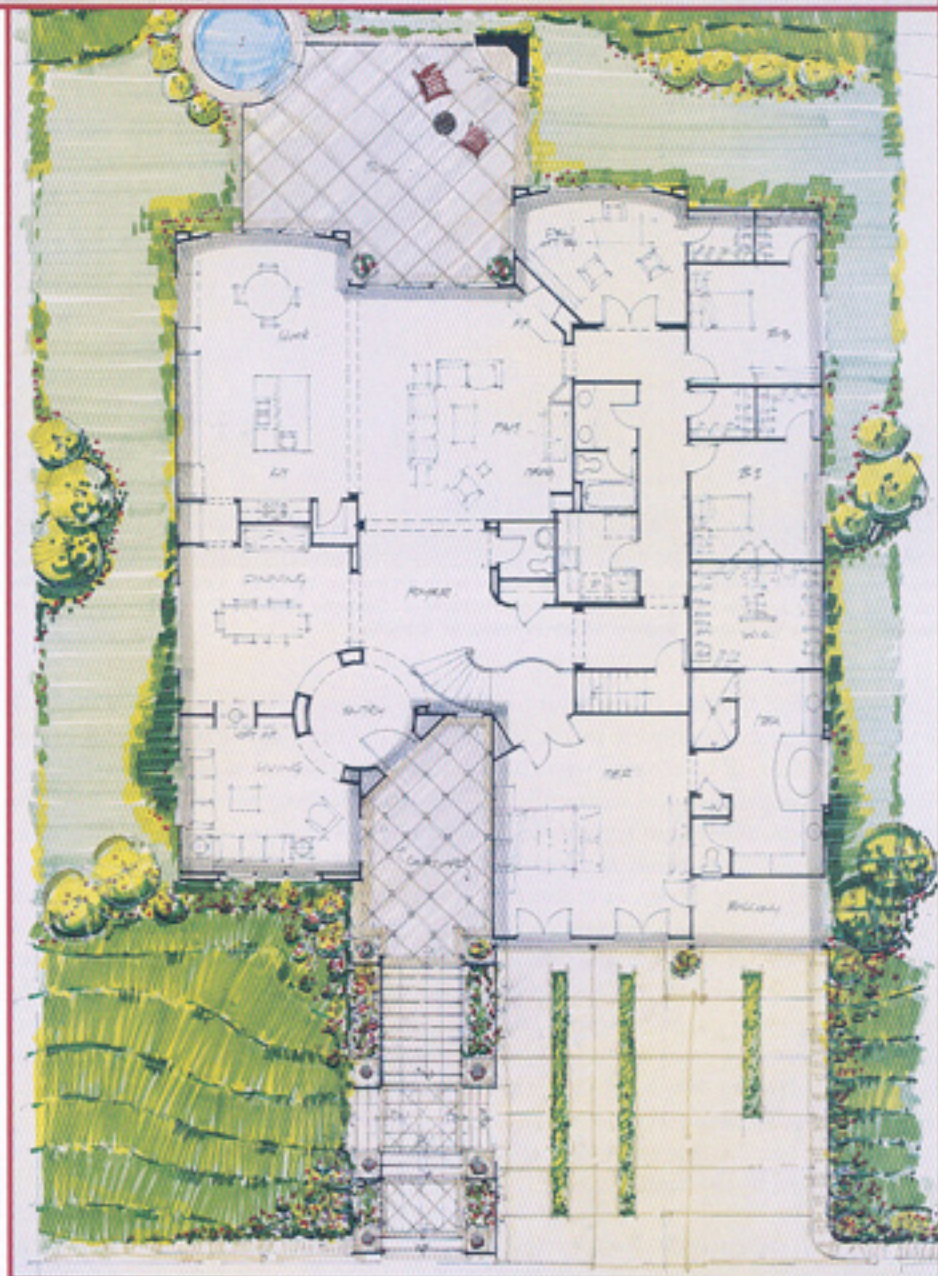
At right and below are the French Country elevation and floorplan of "Plan Two" at Meritage Homes' Stone Canyon in Roseville. It features a single story plan over the garage on an upslope to PAD. © Omega Architectural Group, Inc.

well with the others to create a richness and harmony in the neighborhood. The most appealing streetscapes incorporate not only a variety of architectural styles, but more importantly, diversification in elevation massing.

Variety in massing is important to break the monotonous rhythms of having the same references to the sky, gaps between building, and similar front yard landscaping. Since massing is directly related to the floorplan, builders must break away from the traditional, limiting criteria of room count and square footage in defining a project. Rigid architectural programs that demand the same room "options" for all of the different models also create limitations in elevation design. For example, if the program dictates that all third-car garage spaces must convert to a den option near the entry, all the houses will have similar footprints that generate similar elevation massing. On the contrary, floorplan features such as courtyards, covered front porches, motor court garages, etc., create pleasing diversification in the massing of the elevation.

While good massing is the building block for successful elevations, variations in style, detail, materials and color are key to giving the home a sense of individual identity. It is essential that these elements are translated to the interior of the home as well. Architectural details must express a meaningful connection to the architectural style and not just be "tacked on" as though it were an afterthought. The understanding and balance of the architectural detail is critical for the harmonious daily human experience of the spaces and views of the house.

The appearance-conscious home buyer who demands distinction in the exterior





Featured above is the stunning entry foyer and staircase of "The Cascade" at Sterling Park in Tracy by Meritage Homes. Architecture © Omega Architectural Group, Inc. of Benicia. Photo © Robert Brown & Associates of Rocklin.

elevation is also looking for innovation in floorplan design to complete that "custom" look. One of the most popular floorplan concepts that has steamrolled into production housing in recent years is the courtyard. Incorporating an exterior courtyard in the design of a home—whether in the front, down the side, or in the rear—will provide interesting floorplan circulation, bring more light into the house, and offer engaging points of view. The courtyard becomes a contextual element, within itself, that not only adds floorplan interest but adds drama and romance into the home. It is a distinct space that can be personalized by the homeowner.

Another plan configuration that is gaining popularity incorporates a motor court

style driveway, with the garage set back from the front of the house. This layout takes us back to a custom home tradition of parents being able to watch from the kitchen as children played in the motor court. Additional light and points of view are afforded to the side of the house that is usually closed in by the garage. Since the front of the garage is set back, it does not dominate the front elevation as is often the case in production housing. Focus can instead be directed to a dramatic formal entry.

Many other custom elements have worked their way into production housing floorplans. Foyers, grand or small, are essential to establishing homeowner identity and need to be a defined space that

is entered into, rather than just walked through. There is a trend toward reducing room count and providing more space in rooms where families can function together. Production builders are providing what the discriminating buyer is looking for—more spacious hallways, separation of master bedroom from kids' rooms, upstairs laundry rooms, bonus rooms, gourmet kitchens with baking centers, walk-in pantries, butler's pantries and walk-in linen closets.

The final area of consideration in "customizing" production homes is in regard to selection of finish materials and the specification of appliances and fixtures. Granite countertops, hardwood floors, marble shower surrounds and custom cabinetry are just some of the features showing up in today's subdivisions. Upgrade items such as a second dishwasher, vegetable sinks in islands, commercial-grade kitchen appliances, wine refrigerators and freezer space in laundry rooms, are also working their way into production housing.

Maximizing sales in today's market of discerning home buyers is largely dependent on new home builders' effectiveness in conveying a custom look and feel to their projects. Broadening the definition of production building sites to include areas of varied topography afford the opportunity to create interesting and appealing projects. Regardless of the site, good architecture is indispensable—innovative plan design, diversification in elevation massing and thoughtful detailing make a project stand out.

Offering amenities that were once only seen in custom homes gives buyers the chance to create the unique home they desire. Considering the vast number of choices available to today's home buyers, the home builder providing that distinctive, "custom feeling" home is sure to come out ahead of the pack.

Stevan Bowker is the owner and principal architect for Omega Architectural Group, Inc. Since 1983, Benicia, California-based Omega Architectural Group has provided architectural services for developers specializing in homes for planned residential communities throughout Northern California. For further information, please call Steve at (707) 746-6586. ©