

Show stoppers

Over-the-top homes come with upsides, downsides

By Lew Sichelman
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ORLANDO – As usual at the International Builders Show, the New American Home was the main attraction. And this time around it had an uncle, the Renewed American Home, a reborn house that started life in 1909 as a small, working-man's cottage.

▪ [Coat of armor?](#)

But with the kitchen and living area on the third floor and the secondary bedrooms on the entry level, the new house might just as well been called the upside-down house. And the remodeled house? Well, it was completely gutted, so for all practical purposes, it, too, was brand new.

That's not to say the two show houses in downtown Orlando's Lake Eola neighborhood didn't serve their purpose, which is primarily to showcase the latest and greatest from the nation's largest building products manufacturers. And they did have some interesting features, like the cistern that collects rainwater for irrigation.

But if you are really looking for what the crystal ball shows for America's housing, the answer was much closer to the huge Orange County Convention Center, where more than 100,000 builders and allied professionals converged for six days last month for the National Association of Home Builders' annual ring-dang-do.

Indeed, it was in the parking lot, right next to where scores of buses dropped off and picked up conventioners who were staying in hotels scattered across the central Florida city.

Labeled the NextGen House, this show home wasn't a thing of beauty, at least not on the outside. But inside, and “inside” the inside, the 2,700-square-foot house gave visitors an up-close look at the future of home construction.

This was the fifth incarnation of the NextGen House, but the first to feature a second story, the better to display the four principles it was designed to demonstrate – strength, environmental friendliness, efficiency and connectivity. Just up the stairs, several “cutaways” allowed builders to peer behind the walls to see special features that can't be experienced any other way.

How else to witness in action a hybrid heating and air conditioning system by Carrier that switches automatically from natural gas to electricity, depending on the outdoor temperature? Or an insulation system that acts as both a thermal insulator and air barrier?

Not visually exciting stuff, to be sure. But to most home builders searching for ways to save their buyers a few bucks – and to distinguish themselves from their competitors – these are usually hidden assets.



JAMES WILSON

Built for the recent International Builders Show in Orlando, the New American Home raised eyebrows by having its kitchen and living room on the third floor, accessible by elevator.

With the “smart” HVAC system, for example, owners will be able to choose for themselves the source of energy to use to heat and cool their homes, and can switch depending on the rise and fall of fuel prices.

The insulation system, which includes wraps that not only insulate but also protect against mold, mildew and wood rot and floor-to-ceiling sheathing panels that eliminate air leaks, is supposed to help trim energy costs substantially. And then there's the Icynene soft foam insulation itself, which expands to 100 times its original volume in seconds and then hardens to create a complete air seal in walls, ceilings, attics and floors.

Meanwhile, up on the roof, another place that's hard to see without a ladder, stone-coated, 26-gauge steel roofing panels that are made of 25 percent post-consumer recycled steel and look like wood shake – or tile or shingles, if you like – came together with an interlocking fastening system that protects against earthquakes and 120-mile-an-hour hurricane-force winds. At half the weight of composition shingles, no less.

Back down to earth, the interior of the NextGen House brewed up a storm of its own with the throng of builders as they inched their way through, shoulder-to-shoulder, belly-to-belly.

After all, the place also had its share of fancy new gadgets and gizmos, just like the New and Renewed American Homes.

“We're trying to balance needs of the consumer with benefits and costs,” explained Dana Bres, a research engineer in the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research. “Lifestyle leads, technology only suggests; all the time.”

One crowd stopper was the master suite, which was coated in Kevlar, the same material that is used in bullet-proof vests, and acts as an in-home storm shelter that can keep occupants safe in category 5 tornadoes or hurricanes.

Another focal point was the built-in coffee center, said to be “a most wanted” appliance that brings the art of making espresso, cappuccino, macchiato and lattes into the American kitchen.

Then there was the disappearing faucet by Delta, designed to save kitchen work-space. To get water, simply pull the inlaid joystick forward and the spout rises out of the countertop. When you're done, push the control back and the spout retracts back out of the way.

And who couldn't resist stopping at the Connect IO oven? Said to be the “first” with built-in refrigeration to keep foods fresh, before and after cooking, the range also has the ability to change any cooking function from anywhere inside the house – or outside via a phone or the Internet.

Which brings us to the real NextGen show-stopper, the digital entertainment and home automation package that allows you to do everything from closing the window shades to playing your favorite song, all with just a touch – from anywhere in the home.

The system featured touch screens throughout the house, placing all the home's automated components at the occupant's fingertips. The software could be programmed to tell the oven when to come on, eyeball visitors at the door, or turn off the lights and turn on the security system when the front door is locked.

In addition, every function could be accessed from a TV screen, PDA, Xbox 360, PC or laptop from anywhere in the world. A costly – and maybe unnecessary – accessory, perhaps; which is why the home automation industry is still in



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It wasn't the exterior design, but the gadgets and materials featured inside the NextGen House that captured builders' attention.



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The family room in the NextGen House. A digital entertainment and home automation package controls everything from window shades to music.

its infancy, with less than a 5 percent market penetration. But what had visitors turned on and tuned in was the fact that the Life-Ware software by Exceptional Innovation of Wasterville, Ohio, offers four packages to meet most pocketbooks.

Meanwhile, miles away in downtown Orlando, a block from the city's iconic Lake Eola, busloads of builders also tracked through the side-by-side New and Renewed American homes, which drew their inspiration from the back-to-town movement by home owners who have decided to forsake the suburbs to be within walking distance of restaurants, parks, entertainment venues and work.

For nearly 25 years now, the New American Home has been the focal point of the nation's largest building industry trade show. The one-of-a-kind demonstration house is supposed to serve as a real-laboratory to introduce the latest concepts in product development, construction trends, lifestyle trends and architectural designs.

No wonder, then, that the new house felt more like an experiment than a home.

A concrete structure, the place is architect Bloodgood Sharp Buster's "modern interpretation of the bungalow style." But it was loaded with design errors, which, unfortunately, are all-too common in one-of-a-kind houses. The kitchen island was much too large, for example. The walls of the open, outside shower were way too low for a female to have much privacy and almost too low for a male.

And that floor plan. What were they thinking?

The entry level included two secondary bedrooms, home theater, wet bar and laundry room. In an attempt to capture the flavor of the street-level professional and retail offices sprouting up in the historic Heights District, it also featured office space off the foyer with private access to the street.

The middle, or second, level, held the master suite, which took up the entire floor, while the loft-like third level housed the wide-open kitchen, eating area and living room.

It was said that the living and entertainment portions of the house were placed on the top floor to take advantage of the view of the lake a block or so away. But truth be told, because the neighborhood's tree-lined streets are in full bloom almost year-round, the better, less obstructed view is from the deck off the master suite on the floor below.

And who wants to carry groceries up three flights of stairs? Or would guests be willing to march up three floors to be entertained? Luckily, there was an elevator.

But perhaps we are too critical. After all, the place had some great features, the neatest of which was perhaps the irrigation system. Fed by concealed perimeter gutters that channel storm water runoff through a series of downspouts that also pick up rainwater from roof-top planters and the laundry sink, the system delivers excess water to a catch basin under the driveway.

From there, the water is pumped through a filter to catch solids and ends up in the 7,000-gallon cistern that is built like a crawl space beneath the garage slab. From there, it is pumped when needed to the underground irrigation system as well as back up to the roof-mounted planters.

The innovative rainwater management, retention and reuse system was devised by graduate students at Central Florida University's Stormwater Management Academy to retain 95 percent of the water generated by a 5-inch rainfall.

"This is doable for almost any house design and site," Martin Wanielista, the program's director, told *Builder* magazine, the trade journal that co-sponsors the New American Home every year.

Other attention-grabbing features included the acid-washed, exposed concrete walls, which created random patterns and colors, and the porous driveway, which also improves rainwater retention.

Next door, the Renewed American Home was much more traditional, and therefore more friendly and inviting. "It is supposed to take you back to when people lived more formally, more elegantly," said Paul Gidus of PSG Construction, the re-builder.

But again, it was so thoroughly redone that except for the skeleton, some of the original floor and the roof lines, everything was new. "There's wasn't much to save when you come right down to it," Gidus said of the circa 1909 house, which was expanded to nearly three times its original 2,462 square feet of living space. "But the thought was there."

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