

KYLE HUNT & PARTNERS INCORPORATED

The Artisan Approach to Custom Homebuilding

By W. K. Bennis, Kyle Hunt Partners, Incorporated © Copyright 2003

INTRODUCTION

A “new” approach with centuries old roots

Examples of the ‘art’ of architectural design, and the master craftsmen who executed it, reach back centuries in time, not only in terms of commercial architecture, but residential architecture as well. From as recently as the beginning of the 20th century, we can find many standing testaments of artisans coming together to create stunning homes, whether grand or quaint in stature. It is these homes that we still stop to admire. And many who own one of these old beauties recognize that their renovation and preservation can be a worthwhile and rewarding endeavor.

What makes these homes so special is their quality - in terms of architectural design, construction, and interior design. It is a quality that comes from the individual creativity of each of the professionals involved, shining through and combining to produce a symphony of detail and character that feels alive and fully reflects the owner’s personality and style. The sometimes subtle, sometimes bold architectural details, the functionality of spaces, the unique use of stone or pattern of brick; the carved mantel, the shades of color, light and texture throughout each room. It is the coming together of artistic creativity, like the great artisan builders of our past, that makes the difference between ordinary and spectacular. It is the Artisan Approach.

What we build today will impact our landscapes for generations. Whether large or small, will they be homes of distinction that our children’s children will be proud to own and preserve? Will future generations linger along the roadside, appreciate these homes’ qualities - be they simple or majestic - and be thankful that those who came before took the time and care to create such enduring treasures?

The Artisan Approach is economically more attainable than one would think. In fact, we believe opportunities exist to extend this philosophy across the board - including ‘affordable housing’ projects. With this vision as a backdrop, we can explore what the Artisan Approach looks like today.

THE ARTISAN APPROACH TO CUSTOM HOMEBUILDING

The Artisan Approach today requires a team of artisan professionals

The architect, builder and interior designer that form the Artisan Approach team, are individuals and firms that are free to exercise their creativity to its fullest capacity. To ensure this kind of creative freedom, an appropriate ‘balance of input’, a collaborative approach to design and construction ideas, and respect for each other’s roles must exist between these three professionals. To better understand what this balance of input looks like, let’s compare two models that currently exist in the building industry.

Design/Build - The One Stop Shop

- Builder employs in-house architects or design/draftspeople and, increasingly, in-house interior design services
- Builder calls all the shots. Builder is free to exercise its influence and control over architect and interior designer, driven by factors that may only be important to the builder.
- No ‘checks and balances’ or balance of input exists for the life of the entire project.

The Artisan Approach

- Client is free to draw from a large pool of independent, creative talent
- Builder often takes lead role to guide the process, but it is a collaborative role with client’s chosen design professionals.
- Team of true artisans uniquely tailored to clients style and budget – each bringing value to the process with client’s best interests and goals in mind.
- Creates an appropriate balance of input to the project’s and client’s benefit.

Clearly, the one stop shop limits client’s choices from the start and all along the way. Common sense is quick to point out that one or even a few in-house architects or interior designers cannot possibly have the breadth of talents, styles and personalities to fit the unique needs and personalities of every client that walks in the door. Why would anyone limit their choices and limit creative input, especially when it comes to something as important as building their own custom home? Especially considering that, for most, building a home is the single largest investment they will make in their lifetime. One stop shop proponents will argue that their approach can save time and money. So let’s address that.

Economies of Scale come into play with any approach

Size, complexity of design, quality of construction materials, and finish level are the main factors driving the cost of any home. How each of these factors weigh into the overall budget equation can vary immensely from home to home. For instance, if a higher finish level is more important to you, perhaps the size and complexity of design can be more minimal to allow for additional allocation to finishes. Even with the quality of some construction materials, there are grades of good, better, best that are still all acceptable product. (That said, there are, of course, some materials that a good builder will not compromise on.) These are all elements a good design team will educate you about and help to guide your decision making, so it is not at all overwhelming for you, but becomes a natural part of the discussion during the design process. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is necessary for the sake of brevity to find a simpler reference point for our discussion of cost, so we will use three broad budget ranges:

- Approximately \$1 million and up
- \$400,000 to \$800,000
- Under \$400,000

We have found, for instance, that builders that work within similar budget tiers are highly competitive, regardless of their approach, contrary to what popular conceptions may be. Certainly the fees of a custom home builder in the \$1 million and up range may be higher than the other two tiers, for example, but within each tier we would be surprised to find any wide swings. What you will want to do, then, is seek out Artisan Professionals that are within your budget scope. In this manner, you too can enjoy all the benefits of the Artisan Approach when building your home.

One example which is easy for us to point to, is Cottagewood Partners, the sister company of Kyle Hunt & Partners. Cottagewood Partners builds homes at the \$400,000 to \$800,000 level, and very successfully and competitively uses the Artisan Approach. With the extensive pool of architectural and interior design talent the Twin Cities has to offer, we are confident that the Artisan Approach can be successful for any project at any budget level.

One final point that is important to convey relative to our discussion of cost, is the manner in which the Artisan Approach professionals work together. Many assume that with three professional firms involved, there will be an overlap of time and effort that will unnecessarily drive up the cost of the project. To the contrary, Artisan Approach Professionals who are experienced with this approach are extremely sensitive to this concern. Overlapping of efforts is easily avoided by the team appointing one professional entity who is the 'gatekeeper' of the project, very often the builder, to ensure the effective communication and coordination of efforts between team members, including the client. The claim that there is duplication of effort with the Artisan Approach just doesn't hold water. You may also want to think in terms of this analogy: The one stop shop is more akin to having one doctor and two aides. With the Artisan Approach, you have three specialists, plus the full support of each of their offices behind them. It is easy to see where the greater value is for you and your project.

All of this is not to say that the Artisan Approach will be your least expensive alternative. Chances are it won't be. However, it is competitively costed, and the short and long term benefits are immeasurable. The investment you make in your custom home is deserving of the kind of professional care, creative talent and good planning the Artisan Approach can deliver.

A truly custom, signature home, regardless of size, takes time to properly design

The design/development phase of the entire construction process is one of the most critical. If the design isn't right, actual construction of the home can be frustrated, creating time delays and often increased costs. Even more importantly, you could be disappointed with the end result. Perhaps you will find yourself wishing you really would have had a larger closet here, didn't really need a formal dining room after all and could have done something more practical to your daily life with that space, or wish you had that mail center/desk area in the kitchen like you first thought. Shortchanging the design process is not worth it! The forethought and care that is necessary in considering each and every detail of your home cannot be emphasized enough. Here is where having a collaborative team of Artisan Professionals, each contributing valuable insights and expertise, makes all the difference.

When gauging the time that a construction project takes, economies of scale very obviously come into play again. A larger home will take longer than a smaller home to design, build and decorate. Although timing design phase can vary based on a number of different factors, as a reference point, for a \$1.5 million home Kyle Hunt & Partners builds, we typically will allow a minimum of four months for the design phase. Not to say that it's always the case, but let's just assume for argument's sake, that the entire process from start to finish using the Artisan Approach takes 2 - 3 months longer than a one stop shop. Is that 2 - 3 months of time well spent to have an Artisan Approach home that you will delight in every day for years to come, and that future generations will cherish? In making the decision of whether to build an Artisan Approach home, this perspective is important to keep in mind.

When all is said and done....

The person who will embrace the Artisan Approach to Custom Homebuilding is someone that looks at their home as an extension and reflection of their own personality and character, and appreciates the significance of leaving a beautiful mark on the architectural landscape. This 'mark' comes in many different forms - colonial, contemporary, bungalow, shingle style, etc. But what each Artisan Approach home does have in common, regardless of size and style, is the kind of quality and appeal that only a creatively free process within the context of balanced input can accomplish.

We hope you found this paper to be informative. If you are considering building an Artisan Approach home, we invite you to contact Kyle Hunt & Partners.

Thank you.

When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight nor present use alone. Let it be such work that our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time will come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, "See! This our father did for us."

-- John Ruskin --