

Detail Oriented

Home buyers have other options, but they don't come cheap

Say a Perry Home just won't do for you. In a state dominated by mass-market builders, what will?

Some cautious buyers opt for older homes. Most Victorians were built by real carpenters, back before they were replaced by hand-to-mouth day laborers. Even so, if you're not a disciple of Bob Vila or Kevin O'Connor, you'll need to drop some cash on a professional renovator. Fitting a modern dishwasher into a retro kitchen can take time.

Buyers who want a well-constructed house — yet one erected after the invention of air-conditioning and light bulbs — might want to check out small companies such as Builders West. Founded in 1982 by architect Kurt Lobpries, it has built a reputation for sturdy design and an old-school attention to detail.

Lobpries stands inside the wood frame of a house on Ferndale Street near Upper Kirby and scrutinizes the tall beams. He wears a tape measure on his belt and the flat-lipped scowl of a perfectionist. "I'm real anal," he says. "I always want to do things my way; I want to know every detail on every job."

That's an impossible goal, of course, but small builders such as Lobpries may come much closer to it than Perry. Lobpries is willing to spend the extra money to hire employees who are almost as anal as he is. His contractors are longtime independent operators who usually work alongside their employees.

And his laborers have years of on-the-job experience, not to mention other training. "I've got guys who are out in the field who swing hammers who are college graduates," he says. "The caliber of personnel is just so far beyond the caliber of what the average guy does."

Lobpries also calls for top-quality materials. To construct house frames, most builders use pine studs, which tend to warp with Houston's temperature fluctua-

tions. Builders also typically insert "finger joints," which are small pieces of wood joined end to end. Lobpries uses only single studs of sturdy fir. He lines the lower portions of walls with treated lumber to prevent rotting in the event of floods. And he uses up to twice as much wood in a wall as builders such as Perry.

The result, he says, is a house that will withstand Houston's storms and extreme heat for generations.

Before Lobpries's workers plaster over their handiwork with drywall, the company videotapes the entire structure. He says that watching the movies allows homeowners to install new components without hitting a hidden wire or pipe. But the short films are also visual proof of the type of craftsmanship that goes unseen and unheeded by most home buyers.

"In the mass market, the bells and whistles have value," says Bob Hooker, Lobpries's project manager. "The fact that I have treated plywood and [have put in] lots of tender love and care means nothing. The market is not sophisticated enough."

amazed when you go to Midtown and you see wood structures four to five stories" tall, he says. Builders here "are doing things that would be completely outlawed in Europe."

Of course, higher standards abroad also translate into more expensive homes. In the United States, where there are fewer government subsidies, buying such a house can be tough. Lobpries recently built a one-bedroom, one-bath house in the West End for \$300,000. Buyers of modest means will need to sacrifice some amenities if they want a house with top-quality fundamentals.

Donna Kacmar's West End town house is a case in point. A UH architecture professor, she built her 1,600-square-foot abode for \$72,000. "We spent money on two-by-six exterior walls, on a good foundation, on the CMUs [concrete masonry units] and on the railing, and no other finish," she says. The floor is polished plywood.

Kacmar has no regrets: Hardwood floors or a whirlpool tub can always come later.



Kurt Lobpries, founder of the boutique building company Builders West, says his homes will last for generations, but they'll cost you.

But those types of details make all the difference in other housing markets, such as in those in Japan and much of Europe. University of Houston architecture professor Dietmar Froehlich spent years designing buildings in his native Austria, where the construction and craftsmanship standards are much stricter. Wood-frame town houses are unknown; the standard housing materials are reinforced concrete and thick, energy-efficient bricks. "I am always

But even adventurous Houston architects haven't come up with many urban alternatives to Perry's ballyhooed streetscapes. The first story of Kacmar's house features a garage door and not much else. "When we moved here nine years ago, it was a different place," she says. "There were not any \$300,000 town homes; there was a lot of crime, and we felt much safer having that first floor be impenetrable." — Josh Harkinson