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Reflections and Projections

Consumer Demand Will Keep Green Building Booming



Guest Op Ed

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The year 2008 will likely be imprinted into our country's collective memory as a time of skyrocketing oil costs, a meltdown on Wall Street and the year the housing bubble burst.

Granted, a boom housing market is bound to experience certain "corrections" to maintain a balance. This is the sign of a healthy market, and in the long run provides some benefit to first-time home buyers or those looking to upgrade.

The roller coaster ride we experienced in 2008, however, proves what can result from extreme imbalance. Simplistically speaking, housing costs had risen too far, too fast. Eventually, prices were out of range for most home buyers.

This factor, accentuated by fluctuations in the global financial market and freakishly high fuel costs, caused a significant drop in consumer confidence. The home buying and home building markets screeched to a halt.

Typically, homeowners resort to renovating what they own in tough times; but 2008 was an exception. In general, worried consumers held tight to their wallets amid uncertainty.

All of this may not seem like a recipe for success for those of us in the business of building luxury custom homes—or for any business—but it does present us with an excellent opportunity to rethink our products, services and the way we do business.

Many more builders, for example, driven mostly by consumer demand, have recently turned to a way of working that I have long espoused as a cornerstone of construction and renovation: green building. It utilizes sensible and economical principles that offer buyers lower operating costs, reduced maintenance, increased value and improved environmental quality.

There is currently more industry-wide awareness of green building than ever before. Practices and products that conservationists and some innovative builders have advocated for decades have finally entered the mainstream market.

This breakthrough is proof of the consumer's power. Motivated by four-dollar-per-gallon gas prices and dizzying electric and heating costs, buyers demanded energy efficiency and the market responded.

For me, green building is a tradition, not a trend. My company, Clemluddy Construction, is named in honor of my great grandfather Clement Leddy, a man with an unwavering sense of duty, honesty and morality, who I was fortunate to have in my life as a mentor.

I'm optimistic. I believe the residential housing market will ultimately swing back into balance. Perhaps not immediately in 2009, but eventually, when consumers witness the results of government and private sector efforts to stabilize our economy.

Let's be honest, we're Americans and we love to buy things. We're capitalists; and when our buying ability has been turned off we crave it.

Let's also be realistic: we're Americans dependent on oil. We need to conserve energy, develop alternative fuels that don't pollute our environment, and continue to build greener homes even when gas prices aren't making front page headlines.

To achieve this, we'll all need a healthy dose of the good old American spirit that makes our country great, the voice of the people that drives our economy forward.

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