

THE METROPOLITAN BUILDER

INSIDE SHOWCASE



White Oak Homes Formed
After Personal Experience



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By Kathy Bowen Stolz

Sometimes you learn as much when things go wrong as when they go right. For Doug Sykes of White Oak Homes Houston, it was his hands-on experience with building his own home in the Heights that gave him a “doctorate” in building after previously flipping a house.

“I learned my lessons from my builder on how exactly you don’t do it. I basically learned from my builder’s mistakes. I thought I could do it better and became a general contractor on my own house.”

Always wanting to own a business, Doug used those experiences to catapult himself into the building industry, which led several years later to the incorporation of White Oak Homes in 2019.

Sykes laughs that although he has a degree in business marketing from Texas State University, he doesn’t do marketing for his company, relying on word-of-mouth referrals instead. “My customers are ‘real’ people who work and who are interested in investing in their homes.”

After working for years as a manufacturer’s representative selling electronics for military applications, he started his contracting career with a spec home building site that the original builder had abandoned; he bulldozed the foundation and frame because it had not been touched for two years before starting over with the original plans.

“I always wanted to build spec homes – I build one or two a year – but the other side of my business – remodeling –



really took off when my wife Stephanie Sykes left teaching and got into real estate. Her business created a natural funnel for my business because people selling houses need to fix things, usually minor stuff. But people buying houses want a new kitchen, a new bathroom. They want to spend money on the new house!”

Sykes said he grew his business organically, which has taken time. He accepts smaller paint jobs because they can turn into a large kitchen remodel, for example. “I guarantee those clients will call me later. I don’t leave on bad terms with anybody.”

He lives and works primarily in Houston’s Heights neighborhood. “I’ve got a niche as a local Heights builder. You can find me in Google under ‘local builder.’ I don’t do cookie-cutter stuff. There’s not a lot of competition for what I do.”

He noted that the Heights’ walkability makes it a small

community within a big city. “All of my neighbors see the White Oak Homes sign in my office window as they walk by. On one side of the street there are historic restrictions. My side is not. I’ve worked on six homes across the street. There are a lot of bungalow additions. I try to steer toward the ones that maintain the one-story look of the bungalow.”

However, Doug said he accepts work within a one-hour radius of the Heights, primarily in Katy and The Woodlands.

Juggling three to seven jobs at any given time is his sweet spot. He hires general contractors but can be a micro manager for his spec homes. “If I’m building a spec home from the ground up, I’ll start my day there. I’m always around, but I’m not at each job site every day.”

His projects range from \$25,000 to \$1 million. He noted that his projects have grown beyond the smallest jobs. In the early days, about 75 percent of his work was on spec



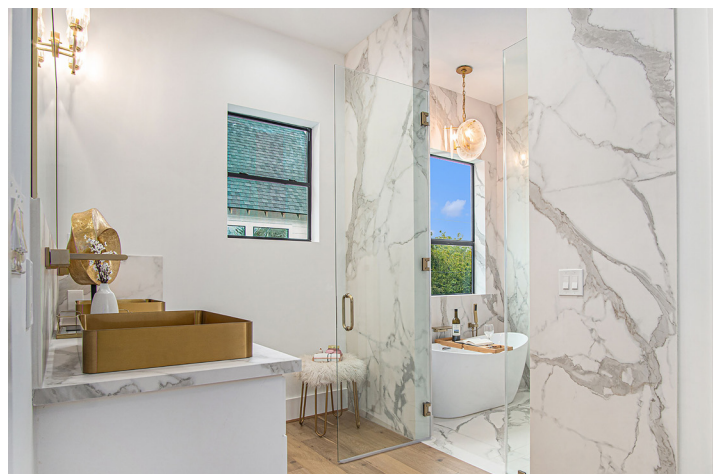
homes and 25 percent on renovations. Nowadays, it's about 33 percent on custom spec homes and 67 percent on remodeling. He observed that banks aren't lending on ground-up construction currently, but they will "loan all day on remodels."

Current projects include converting a garage into an apartment, converting an attic into a bedroom and building a garage in an historic area with its restrictions.

Sykes carefully selects his architects and subcontractors. He fired 22 painters before he found the ones with the skill set he wanted, for example. Now he can send trusted painters, carpenters and tilers to a job site without direct supervision. "I know what guys are good at what. One floor guy is good at matching stains on hardwood between new and old construction. Another specializes in engineered flooring.

"Carpentry is what makes my houses stand out. If there's unused space in there, I'm building it out. That space can become a mud room or closet or butler's pantry that wasn't in the plans. I hate for space to go to waste."

Sykes unabashedly values his trades people. "My guys are very loyal to me. I respect them, and they respect me. I appreciate them. They're what make my business grow."







*For more information about White Oak Homes Houston
email doug@whiteoakhomesouston.com
www.whiteoakhomesouston.com • 512-665-2372
Instagram @whiteoakhomeshtx
432 Oxford Street, Houston, Texas 77007*