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Sanctuary Builders Views Homes as Retreats

Sanctuary Builders | Houston, Texas



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By Kathy Bowen Stolz



Houston builder Michele Alvarado chose the name of her company, Sanctuary Builders, carefully. “I think of a person’s home as their sanctuary. It should be a place where they can retreat to or retire to at the end of a day. I wanted my company to reflect that idea.

“Our job is to interpret a prospective homeowners’ vision of what they want their sanctuary to be. We always strive to create an interior that will have a sense of place where the owner can recharge,” she added. “We focus on hundreds of design details, creating places and spaces that are aesthetically pleasing, intuitive and practical – from the flow of one room to another to the interrelationship of colors and materials that strike just the right ambiance in the room.”

Sanctuary Builders is also how Alvarado recharged herself by starting a new career and fulfilling a long-held goal of becoming a builder.

“I always had an interest in real estate and tried to start my career in commercial real estate after graduating with an MBA from the University of Texas, but all the commercial real estate companies were pretty chauvinistic at the time. All they offered me were marketing/leasing positions, not the project manager or finance positions I wanted and felt were a better fit for my skill sets. My brilliant idea was to go into the commercial real estate area of banking, develop relationships and then go back out and get the job I wanted.”

everything put together. It fascinated me; it’s such an intricate puzzle. I liked having the finished product, a tangible result of creativity and problem solving.” She revised her career goal to become a builder herself.

With a partner who had the construction and land development experience she lacked, she started building after almost 30 years in the banking industry. “In 2012 I decided it was time for me to make the move because I was getting to an age where it wouldn’t be practical to wait any longer.” The company built four speculative houses before she and her partner decided to part ways because they realized they had different goals and objectives. Michele bought out her partner and decided to



But at that time in the mid-1980s, Texas’s construction business took a nosedive because the oil and gas industries were struggling. “The economy was so bad and stayed that way for many years; inertia set in, and I never made my move [out of banking].”

In the meantime Alvarado said she bought a house and loved remodeling it. She found herself helping friends with their home improvement projects, too. Then she and her husband built one house, then another.

“I really, really liked the building process. I liked seeing

keep Sanctuary Builders as the company name because it expressed her feelings about building.

Sanctuary Builders includes Bill Edwards, master builder, as the director of construction. “I am truly blessed to have Bill on my team; he is an outstanding builder and a great person. We have a very good balance of skills. We are respectful of each other’s expertise.”

Bill has more than two decades of custom home building experience as owner of Bill Edwards Custom Homes and president of Comfort Homes, both in Houston.



“We think about the long term so whatever we build will increase in value....”

Among Bill’s accolades are being named H Magazine’s Top Builder for three years and achieving the National Association of Home Builders’ highest certification, Graduate Master Builder. He has also earned three other designations: Certified Green Professional, Certified Aging-in Place Specialist and Certified Graduate Builder.

Bill graduated with honors from the University of Houston with a bachelor’s degree in construction management. Before becoming a homebuilder, Edwards apprenticed with, then operated a mill shop, where he learned to value fine craftsmanship, evident in the homes he builds.

Sanctuary builds a mix of contract-to-build and custom spec homes, which Michele and Bill see as two different divisions. On the contract-to-build side they see their job is to implement the vision of their custom home clients, while advising their clients on making cost-effective and environmentally friendly choices. Custom home clients are looking for service, so they need a builder they can build a relationship with, Michele said.

Sanctuary anticipates increasing its custom home building by word-of-mouth marketing, getting referrals from realtors and architects and buying lots in great

neighborhoods.

At the same time, Michele, who earned a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from the University of Texas, enjoys building spec homes. “I love the challenge of designing an efficient space with the right weight of form and function and flow. And my artistic side gets to come out to pull together the interior, picking out lighting and plumbing fixtures and selecting paint and tiles.”

Sanctuary Builders currently has one contract-to-build house and three spec houses under construction. Its fourth and fifth houses are in the permitting process, and it has a lot available for a build-to-suit home.

She said Sanctuary will probably limit itself to building four or five homes at one time, perhaps fewer if more than one custom home is in the mix; custom homes simply take more time, and their owners deserve more hands-on attention. “We never want to grow so big that we are not personally involved with each home.”

Alvarado carefully considers a site’s location for the spec homes. “We like to stay urban; we don’t want to compete with production builders in the outer areas. Where and what we build is based on finding the right piece of

land. We may use realtors to find property, or we may find the lots ourselves. We don't want to cram as many houses as possible on a piece of land just to make the numbers work, which makes it challenging to redevelop neighborhoods in thoughtful or mindful ways," Alvarado stated.

"We think about the homes already in the neighborhood and what style and size will fit in well and complement existing homes in the neighborhood. We think about the long term so whatever we build will increase in value," she explained.

As an example, she described a three-lot project in The Heights. Each lot was 25-feet wide. "On this particular block, the houses are all two-story. We didn't want to build a three-story house in order to achieve the square footage needed to include the amenities homebuyers expect these days. We worked a little extra hard with the architect to find a way to obtain the square footage we wanted." The solution was to add a second floor to the garage, connecting the garage to the main house via a lanai.

She noted that Sanctuary Builders determines the amenities in its spec homes by talking to realtors about what people are looking for, by looking at recently sold properties and by reading professional magazines as well as seeing what its contract clients are selecting. For the three-house project in The Heights, she tried to design something that would appeal to both young families and empty nesters, two groups that often choose to live in The Heights.

Michele said that it can be an advantage to be a woman builder because she pays attention to the household management issues, such as where to locate the laundry room. She noted that having the washer and dryer in a walk-through to the garage or in a closet-sized space off a hall typically doesn't provide the homeowner a place to fold or hand wash clothes. She said her perspective can add value to a home.

"We don't build a cheap house. We may be making less money than other builders, but we are building a good quality house. We don't cut corners behind the walls or install the least expensive products out there. We use the 'mirror test,' i.e., how would we build our personal home, when making decisions.

"You can sense a good quality home when you walk into

it. It's quieter for one thing. All of our homes are Energy Star-certified; this not only applies to the appliances, but more importantly to the building envelope and HVAC system, which improve the overall comfort of the home. Homebuyers appreciate the higher level of comfort when living in the home," Alvarado said.

Both Alvarado and Edwards focus on providing good customer service. "If you don't do a good job of taking care of your homeowners, they're not going to refer you. And we want to be in business for a long time."

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