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Al-Banna Simplifies
Building Process for Clients

Riverway Development | Houston, Texas



Riverway Development's Al-Banna Simplifies Building Process for Clients

By Kathy Bowen Stolz

Over his 30+ years as a builder, Amad Al-Banna of Riverway Development has learned that the building process can be very stressful for a homebuyer. He knows of some couples who have even divorced while building a home because of the stress.

His remedy is to make building a home as simple as possible, figuratively holding the hands of his clients as he walks them through the process. He said he is in constant contact with his clients, communicating directly with them during the process. "Some builders don't want to talk to their customers. That's not me. I will even accompany them to the design center."

One way that he allays the homeowners' stress is by taking them to their houses during each stage of the building process to sit down and gaze at the unfinished house around them. He wants to find out if they're satisfied with the many little touches, such as where the electrical outlets are placed, that will allow them to enjoy the house for many years.

All of this is because Al-Banna wants to make sure that his clients achieve their unique dream home. "I build a solid house. I never cut corners. I pay attention to detail, attention to quality, and attention to the materials we use." Some of his clients are so happy with their custom

homes that they cry because he was able to fulfill their dreams, he said.

"Their dream home is probably the biggest expense of their lives. They will save money and borrow money to build it. They deserve it," he said.

Although some of his customers consider him to be a dream maker, Al-Banna thinks of himself not just as a builder/developer but as an entrepreneur; he prides himself on operating his business like a machine. He said he is always thinking outside of the box, adapting to the changing trends and markets over the years.

He reckons that he has built through three or four generations of trends. He said he used to build a lot of homes with Mediterranean influences, using red tiles roofs and stucco with an orange hue, followed by requests for Country French homes. He's now finding that homebuyers want kitchens to be in cool colors with white and gray granite surfaces.

Nowadays homebuyers also desire "smart" houses, incorporating technology to make their homes more functional by implementing their phones' applications or remote controls. These homeowners enjoy being able to sit on the couch and manage their home's exterior



security and interior comfort after a busy day.

One of the best changes over the years that he's been building is the availability of improved insulation materials, Al-Banna noted. He said spraying a home with foam insulation cuts the cost of air conditioning and heat by about half, although the initial costs are more than other forms of insulation.

His ability to adapt started in his youth. Al-Banna wanted to be an architect while he was growing up, but when he applied to architectural school, all of the slots were filled. He chose electrical engineering instead and worked in the field for an international company which primarily built hospitals.

Amad came to Houston to work as an electrical engineer for a company that specialized in building medical centers. He absorbed many elements of building from his work as an engineer before becoming a builder/developer in the late 1970s. "As an engineer I used to visit projects from ground zero all the way up. I learned a lot about building from participating in the process."

He said his engineering training and background is especially helpful when it comes to dealing with the myriad of details that go into building and in dealing with banks and financing his projects. "I am able to sit





down and look at a problem, always finding a way to solve it.”

That ability to solve problems served him well when the Houston housing market tanked in the 1980s. Rather than declare bankruptcy as many other builders were forced to do, he relocated his business, first to California and then to Nashville, Tenn., before landing in Atlanta. As the economy improved in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he returned to Texas and re-entered the Houston housing market. “I survived the storm. I kept my nose above water. And I learned a lot,” Amad chuckled.

As the housing market changed over the years, Al-Banna adapted his business and made it grow. He originally built tract homes and multi-family homes, then condominiums and mid-rise and high-rise projects. At one time in the 1990s he was a real estate consultant, helping to dispose of open lots. At the same time he and two partners were building more than 400 homes in the \$300,000- to \$400,000-range each year.

He sold his share in that business in 2005 and has since focused on building commercial projects, town homes usually in The Heights and mid-town areas of Houston, and large custom homes in the \$1- to \$8-million range in the Memorial Villages, Tanglewood, River Oaks and Briar Park areas. Building a house of 12,000 square feet is not unusual for Riverway Development.



Nowadays custom home and town home building are responsible for about 60 percent of the company's income, with commercial building and land development contributing about 20 percent each. Riverway Development keeps about three big custom houses, 12 town house units and five other projects underway at one time. Location is paramount for each of his projects.

Al-Banna epitomizes being a hands-on builder. "I visit the project once, twice, three times a day," although he also uses a construction manager to oversee all projects. "I keep an eye on all of our construction from the beginning. I take care of problems at that time. I use only well-experienced, well-mannered and well-organized subcontractors. I have yet to get a call from a homeowner complaining of a problem."

Despite his years of experience, Amad said he's not ready to retire just yet. He still has plenty of passion for designing and building. And he continues to love the challenge of creating a dream home for his clients. There's no doubt he will adapt and change as his clients' tastes evolve.

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