

Diary of a Custom Home

HOW A FORMER ACCOUNTANT ORCHESTRATED THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF ONE OF OTTAWA'S MOST PALATIAL HOMES. SUSAN LIGHTSTONE REPORTS.

If you passed Tom King on the street, you'd think "now there's a guy who looks like a chartered accountant." And you'd be right. The precise Mr. King is a number cruncher who is perfectly comfortable in a conservative business suit.

Let him loose in work boots, a hard hat and a pickup truck, however, and he becomes Tom King, the builder.

However, the president of Kingsmere Homes isn't an ordinary professional in the trade. He recently spent more than a year building one of Ottawa's most palatial homes.

At 14,000 square feet, this Rockcliffe Park mansion is positively baronial. Winner of the Citizen People's Choice Award at the 2001 Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association Design Awards, this home is the definition of big.

With five furnaces, 10 bathrooms, and 90 doors, the substantial home more closely resembled a commercial project than a residential commission.

Mr. King first saw the site in October 1998. On May 30, 2000, he delivered the home -- a finished and fully-furnished turn-key product -- to its satisfied owners on schedule. If you've been involved in building or renovating a home, you know this is a minor miracle. How did he do it?

"He was the orchestra leader," explains the home's owner.

"I don't hammer nails, I don't design. I pull it all together," Mr. King adds.

His primary tool is his computer and the trick is an extraordinary level of organization. "I believe in Excel," says Mr. King of his computer software. "It's my saviour. I have a little laptop in my truck. Every day, I schedule what's going to happen and if it doesn't happen, it gets rescheduled and the tradesperson gets a phone call."

Interestingly, he also credits parenting four busy children with teaching him a lot of practical stuff about planning and scheduling.

Mr. King is the first to admit he doesn't work alone.

Since trading an accounting career and striking out on his own in 1986 as a builder in Manotick, he's assembled a skilled and reliable team of tradespeople ("they work consistently and they all get along"). The team builds four to five upscale homes a year in the Manotick area.

He called on nearly all of his team members and then added many more to plan and complete the Rockcliffe home. On some days, upwards of 40 workers were in various corners of the house.

"Like me, good trades want a schedule too. They're busy and they like to know where they're going to be and when," says Mr. King.

This home building saga is best told in the organized, chronological fashion in which it unfolded -- under the capable baton of Mr. King.

Acquisition of the Site

In October 1998, Mr. King met with the homeowners on a site they'd located in Rockcliffe. It wasn't his first meeting with them. He'd built their previous home in Manotick. The trust between the parties -- essential to the smooth execution of a large-scale project like this -- was already well-established.

Mr. King swung into organizing mode on Day #1, ensuring that the owner's plans for the site were, in fact, do-able. The owners had until December 1998 to finalize the purchase of the property.

A former embassy -- a once-gracious home now in a state of disrepair -- sat on the property. After deciding it wasn't salvageable, Mr. King knew he was in for a rough patch. Obtaining a demolition permit in Rockcliffe isn't easy and he knew objections would fly.

He immediately introduced architect Barry Hobin to the project in order to determine -- before the owner acquired the land -- whether the existing house could be torn down and another built on the site.

Mr. Hobin "has quite a reputation as being capable of stick handling a difficult project," says Mr. King. The architect, who sat in on the second meeting Mr. King had with the owners, began by developing a set of schematic drawings of the street, illustrating the positioning and scale of the proposed home to existing buildings.

The exterior of the home was developed with careful consideration for "keeping homogeneity with the neighbourhood" and meeting the municipality's demands for specific exterior finishes, including a cedar roof, copper fascia, clay brick and natural stone.

While Mr. Hobin occupied himself with the above-ground issues, Mr. King was down in the dirt.

"The name 'Rockcliffe' scares me. Excavating bedrock is expensive." To ensure he wouldn't be caught by a rocky surprise, engineers drilled about 12 test holes, determining the absence of bedrock.

In December, the sale of the property was finalized and planning began in earnest.

Planning and Design

Mr. King set aside January to March 1999 as hard-core planning months. He's a firm believer in proper planning at the front end.

This means lots of talking with the homeowners, potential suppliers and tradespeople, working to establish a level of trust and a good relationship, while at the same time discovering new products and processes that might be used during the construction process.

"You've got to anticipate the issues before the issues are there," he says. He gives the example of the interior doors. "You can't snap your fingers and have 90 custom-made doors delivered. You need to know when you'll need things."

Mr. King started thinking about whom he would ask to do the carpentry, possible designs for the doors themselves, where he'd find the hardware for the doors and how long the entire process would take.

In the end, Embrun's custom furniture-maker, Alfred Gruber, made all the doors. The elegant door handles were ordered from New York and worth the four-month wait.

The owners, together with Mr. Hobin and Mr. King, scheduled weekly meetings to finalize the look of the place and refine the details.

Early on, the owners had decided they wanted a solid, traditional home. A key element of refining the design focused on determining how the rooms would relate to one another.

"The owner wanted large-scale entertaining rooms," says Mr. King. With Mr. Hobin, the layout of the home was designed to allow the oversized dining and living rooms to not only flow into one another, but also to open onto an expansive central hallway.

The owners wanted to host big receptions where guests could easily move from one room to the next and dining tables could be set up along the length of the hallway.

Windows were a key element of the planning. In his preliminary drawings, Mr. Hobin had allocated space for the windows. It was up to Mr. King to ensure the windows could be made to the designs and large sizes proposed in the drawings.

Mr. King turned to Willmar Windows of Winnipeg for advice. In the end, the company ended up delivering two tractor trailer loads full of windows to the site.

Then there's the domino effect of planning.

"Start with eight items on your list. The architect does them, but it raises two more items to deal with," says Mr. King. During the planning of the basement, for example, the owners decided to add a washroom for the workers who would be frequenting the home and they requested shower facilities for their dogs to be incorporated in the laundry room.

By the end of the planning exercise, the owners knew what Mr. King would deliver in terms of expenses and services. They finalized their deal with a 30-page contract detailing the deliverables and including clauses anticipating extras. An agreement that fully anticipates all possible eventualities is the only way "a job like this goes well" says Mr. King. And the only way to prepare a thorough contract is through extensive planning and "having everything worked out in your own mind."

It was finally time for demolition of the existing home which Mr. King thoughtfully scheduled for March Break, anticipating that many of the families who might be disturbed by the noise would be away for the week.

Next week: The saga continues. Mr. King starts pulling together a team to build the dream home. Then it's time for the real deal -- construction.