

GREAT SPECULATIONS

By Richard A. Rosano / Photography by Leonard Lampel

What features and materials should you expect in those grand residences developed “on spec,” at enormous expense (and risk) to the builder?



*A turret, a faux dovecote, eyebrow windows, gables . . .
in a luxury spec home, the architecture ought to be distinctive.*

Not since the 1980s have so many builders constructed so many luxury homes “on spec”—counting on attracting buyers for houses with living space of 10,000 square feet (and up), selling for \$7 million (and way up). It’s a sign of the times that many affluent families are too busy these days to scout out a property and commit to the intensive decision-making and supervising process required of those who have their houses custom-built.

What should you look for, and look out for, when you’re considering a luxury spec home? Even at the summit of the housing market it’s possible to find less-than-sterling materials, inferior detailing, poor locations, and/or houses that are badly built—or, at least, badly thought-out.

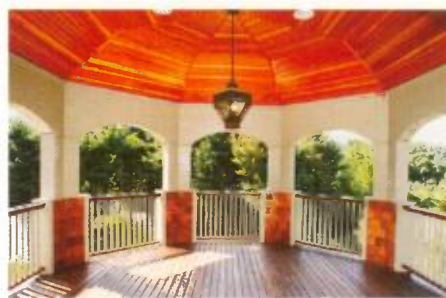
Actually, a home’s quality should be fairly evident at first glance. If a talented team (architect and developer) have designed the house properly, the exterior

will be handsome and distinctive, and the way the home sits on the property will take optimal advantage of the setting and make the best use of natural light. The structure will look comfortable and properly settled into the property, as if it had been there for years, and the surroundings (landscape/hardscape) will be pleasing and well proportioned. At this price point, a buyer shouldn't have to do the landscaping.

And at these prices, the buyer should be getting a residence constructed of superior materials: a roof of slate or cedar (rather than asphalt) shingles, with copper gutters and flashings, and with walls of stone, brick, cedar shingle, or cedar clapboard siding.

The bones of a superior spec home include many attributes that only an engineer could appreciate. Some of these are: specially engineered steel and lumber to support intense floor- and roof-loads; framing that has studding of at least 2 inches by 6 inches, for added insulation space and structural strength; pressure-treated wood sills with termite barrier; and ENERGY STAR-rated thermal pane windows with Low-E glazing and low air-infiltration ratings. The Low-E glazing will help keep out those harmful ultraviolet rays from the sun that damage fabrics, furniture, and flooring.

For your comfort and convenience the home should have a multi-zone hydro-air and/or radiant heating system with properly sized air conditioning, with programmable thermostats that can interfaced with a home automation system. It should have at least a 120-gallon hot water storage tank (we are all too busy to have to wait for hot water) and a hot-water recirculation system.



To accommodate potential later additions like a pool, pool house, bowling alley, or guesthouse, electrical services of 600 to 1200+ amps should be supplemented with a backup generator for power outages. The house should be wired for today's electrical, security, audio, video, home automation, data, and communication needs and for the family's future needs. (The technology already in demand includes whole-house audio, distributed video, hardwired and wireless Local Area Networks, and home automation.) And there must be plenty of properly sized plumbing feeds throughout the house to supply all of those must-have body sprays, shower rain-heads, jetted tubs, and the occasional pot filler for the dog's water bowl. A thorough builder will install a manifold system for domestic water that provides a central location to control the shutoffs for each individual bathroom or kitchen, in anticipation of future makeovers, renovations, etc. The exterior foundation walls should be waterproofed and insulated. To make sure that the basement

Look for unusual detailwork, like wainscoting that reaches up to the second floor (top left), patterned hardwood floors (bottom left), and coffered ceilings and curved extension windows wrapping the first and second floors (above).



The style details in this poolhouse include the gambrel roof, the use of cedar shingles, and the wrapping of Connecticut fieldstone.

walls stay warm and dry, the builder should make them a minimum of 10 inches thick; those walls should be of 2,500 psi (pounds-per-square-inch) poured continuous concrete; the basement floor should be of 3,000-psi poured concrete, at least 4 inches thick. Of course there should be footing drains and hand-sealed foundation ties to ensure a dry basement.

Certainly a luxury spec home should incorporate state-of-the-art materials. Some come with green-building-product certification. One such product is AdvanTech's tongue-and-groove engineered subflooring, which has superior moisture resistance, design bending strength and design stiffness; it is backed by a 50-year limited warranty (see www.huberwood.com). Weyerhaeuser produces green and engineered floor joists (TJI joists) that resist the bowing, twisting, and shrinking that can lead to squeaky floors (see www.ilevel.com). For additional insurance that floors won't squeak, this subflooring should be properly glued and screwed to the floor joists.

Expect a superior estate home to have custom and worthy touches such as an impressive and uniquely crafted 2-inch mahogany entry door, to give the house its own personality and to set the stage for the interior living space. Custom touches—specialty moldings, millwork, and hardwood floor inlays; detailed high ceilings; masonry fireplaces; smartly laid-out, beautiful kitchens; closet systems and built-ins are signature features of a quality luxury spec home.

A luxury spec home deserves design excitement, like an antique beamed family room with stone fireplace, wine cellar, and a curved glass-walled master suite sitting room. Secondary baths should be beautifully outfitted with the same quality materials as the master, and each bath should have soundproof walls and heated floors. Look for attractive architectural elements like specialty windows—circular, with a spoke-and-wheel mutin design, and a couple of eyebrow windows that seamlessly blend into the roofline.

Mudrooms, heated garages with polymer-coated floors, high-end appliances . . . the list of extra-value amenities could go on and on. An estate home must live up to its billing through the superiority of its construction, materials, architectural elements, fixtures, detailing, landscaping, and through the incorporation of all the elements that complement its owners' lifestyle. Speculative or custom, a luxury home should be worthy of its price tag. ❖

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