

# Custom-home market keeps businessowner Liz Harris busy in generally a slow environment for residential construction in the county; the longtime interior designer sees each project as unique

By Ken Datzman

MELBOURNE BEACH — Interior designer Liz Harris, no stranger to residential construction sites in Florida, stands in the area of what will become a great room when this large, riverfront custom home under construction is completed by general contractor Brandon Development Enterprises Inc.

The sweeping water views of the Indian River from the great room are picture-perfect, and so are the surroundings, including the mature live oaks in a tropical setting.

“From an interior designer’s perspective, this is an interesting project to be involved with,” said Harris. “It’s a great concept of design, especially from the interior point of view.”

To Harris, the excitement builds each time her firm is involved in a new-home project — and she has experienced many over a long career — because each one presents a different challenge.

After 31 years in the profession of interior design, an industry that thrives on creativity, Harris’ enthusiastic approach to her job has not wavered, through up-and-down market cycles.

On this project, where an old home was torn down to make way for new construction, New Traditions Interiors, doing business as Designers West Interiors, a residential firm owned by Harris, is teaming with general contractor Brandon Development Enterprises. Jackson Kirschner Architects and Susan Hall Landscape Architect Inc. are working the job, too.

Consumers are still building custom homes in Brevard County and Harris is one of the area designers who is at the center of this activity. The market slump has affected many businessowners in the interior-design field. With development and construction projects few in number over the last three years, the trickle-down has sharply cut into the workload of designers.

Harris says she is fortunate in that her firm has built relationships with both individual consumers, as well as custom builders, who continue to use her professional services.

Brandon Development, owned by businessman-engineer Tom Brandon, is an example of her successfully forging strong ties in the building industry. “I respect how Tom does business,” said Harris. “He cost-values things very well and knows how to adapt to this climate.”

Designers West Interiors in Melbourne posted a solid year in 2010 and is on track for another good performance in 2011, Harris said.

Since the downturn in the housing market, demand for condominium and home interior-design

services has fallen significantly. But Harris’ business, interestingly, continues on a steady path of growth. “I guess I’m a 31-year overnight success.”

Harris says it’s not uncommon for her firm to do a number of projects, from two or three to as many as five, for a single client over a span of years. “I have really good customers and that has been the key,” said Harris, a graduate of Iowa State University’s College of Design and a longtime member of the American Society of Interior Designers.

Presently, her interior-design business is involved in a slate of new-construction projects in the region.

Builders around the nation are cautiously watching the spring home-buying activity to see if the improving economic conditions will help bring more buyers to the table.

Locally, some general contractors are beginning to feel more upbeat about the new-home market in 2011. And Brandon Development Enterprises, a custom-home builder in Melbourne, is also one of those companies.

“In the last two months, we have seen an increasing number of people walk into our office to discuss residential projects, probably more inquiries than all of last year,” said Kevin Kennel, project manager for Brandon Development Enterprises, whose company does both custom-home building and commercial construction.

“They haven’t moved forward yet on these projects, but they are talking with us about them and that is an encouraging sign for the future. There is potential,” he said.

After a four-year stand down on new home buying in the U.S., some experts believe a breakout is around the corner.

“Fortune” magazine’s April 21 issue screams on its cover: “The return of real estate. Finally! After years of plummeting home prices, the market is showing signs of a turnaround.”

It goes on to say in the article that housing is the “most attractive asset class in America” right now, not gold, and that it’s cheaper to own than rent, particularly in the areas hardest hit by the crash, such as Florida.

Clearly, there are deals to be had in the Sunshine State housing market, across all segments, from entry level to new high-end custom homes. The “bear” housing market of the last few years has created both pain and opportunity for consumers.

“Generation X” — young families and adults ages 31 to 45 — are likely to lead the home-buying recovery as it gets under way, according to real-estate experts who spoke at a recent National Association of Home Builders event.

These potential homebuyers are most likely to



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Interior designer Liz Harris, of residential specialist Designers West Interiors, is on the job at a new-home construction site in Melbourne Beach. Harris’ firm, which caters to the custom-home market, has remarkably maneuvered its way through the housing downturn the last few years to continue on a growth path. Harris is a longtime member of ASID.

think it’s a good time to “get off the fence,” and have strong opinions about the design features their new homes will include.

One cutting-edge design feature that Harris is using on the home in Melbourne Beach is a new folding glass-wall system. The product is called “NanaWall.”

For years, architects have been trying to design projects with large glass walls that completely disappear when open — a seamless transition from inside to outside that is also weather-resistant and easy to operate.

The great room Harris is working on at this home will feature the NanaWall system. “They completely fold away, so that the great room opens on the same floor level as the outdoor living space. You can double the size of the great room by putting the window-wall away. They fold beside each other, not like sliders that pocket onto each other.”

Each system is custom designed to the size and number of panels needed. NanaWall Systems’ opening glass walls can be installed anywhere a traditional wall would stand and provide flexible solutions to homeowners, Harris said.