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Blueprints with a sustainable vision

By Mary Umberger

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Legendary Chicagoan Daniel Burnham may be revered for his utterance, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood," but Mark Johnson isn't buying it.

With the help of some renowned architects, the Houston developer and builder is making lots of little plans that he hopes will stir the blood -- or at least the wallets -- of consumers who dream of building their own homes.

In June, he's launching Hometta.com, an endeavor that's known in the housing business as a stock-plan service -- he's selling blueprints by mail. Stock-plan companies have been around for decades, but Johnson hopes to carve a niche by specializing in smaller, strikingly contemporary homes with environmentally sustainable features.

Before starting Hometta, he researched the stock-plan business and found a certain sameness throughout; the market is dominated by traditionally styled homes that are on the larger side, he said.

"The design is very generic, designed to be super-buildable and very standardized," he said. "There's almost no modern, progressive, sustainable design like you would find in a magazine like *Dwell* or *Metropolis*" -- two shelter magazines that feature homes that most observers would strain to describe as "traditional."

So he and his business partners have recruited architects that have earned regional, national and international recognition for homes that are edgy, sustainable or both. Chicago-area architects who have signed on to provide designs for Hometta include Doug Garofalo, Zoka Zola and Sean Lally, Johnson said.

The housing downturn might seem an awkward time to launch such a business, but Johnson says the recession has changed consumer fortunes and expectations that will create demand for a different kind of house.

"I believe there's a huge market for that younger Generation X or Generation Y buyer who doesn't want a McMansion," he said. "They want houses that use less materials and have lower energy costs. People don't need as much space as houses have been built with."

Dave Rook says that's probably a fair assessment. He's the general manager of the home plans division of Hanley Wood, a publisher based in Washington, D.C.; its consumer home plan Web sites include ePlans.com and DreamHomeSource.com.

"Our data say square footage [of plans ordered] has dropped by 100 square feet just in the past year," Rook said. "The average we sell now is 2,400 square feet."

Rook agreed that "smaller" and "sustainable" are likely to be growing categories in the business, which probably averages 100,000 plan sales per year, though he said more specific data are hard to come by. On May 1, Hanley Wood launched a new home-plans magazine title, *EcoHome Designs*, which emphasizes sustainability.

But the printed home-plan magazine, once the staple of grocery-store magazine racks, is a vanishing creature, Rook said. The industry is increasingly going exclusively online, where literally thousands of plans can be shown, compared with a few hundred in the typical magazine.

Hometta.com, which won't have a print component, probably will be operational early in June, with 25 plans initially, Johnson said; he expects eventually to offer 75 to 150 plans.

The homes' square footage will be capped at 2,500, with many that are significantly smaller, Johnson said. The prices won't necessarily be diminutive, though, compared with the industry at large.

"A typical stock home plan is going to range from \$500 to \$2,000," he said. "Ours are going to be more in the \$3,000 range. You're paying a premium for the design."

He's banking on the relative star power of the participating architects to draw consumers who are willing to pay more.

"Generally, modern enthusiasts are willing to pay for good design, especially if it's a home you're going to be living in for years," he said.

Fence-sitting A new annual report from the National Association of Realtors looks at how its members' business is going, and posed an interesting question for agents, appropriate for these uncertain times: What's the biggest difficulty you're seeing in getting transactions to close?

I would have presumed the leading hang-up to be mortgage requirements, seeing as how lenders have finally gotten religion and toughened up their rules.

But, no, that's not the biggest sticking point, according to the 2009 Member Profile from the trade group. Although a considerable number of survey respondents agreed that mortgage requirements are complicating deals, what's really holding them back, according to 35 percent of respondents, is that consumers expect home prices to fall further ... and further ... and so they continue their expectant vigil on that proverbial fence.

Hear Mary Umberger at 12:49 and 11:15 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday and at 10:30 a.m. Saturday and Sunday on WGN-AM 720. Write to her at House & Homes, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., 5th Floor, Chicago, IL 60611 or send e-mail to housingnews@comcast.net.