

washingtonpost.com

Homes With a Bit of the Homeland

Advertisement

Builders Are Catering to Area's Increasing Immigrant Population

By Annie Gowen
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, December 19, 2007; A01

Chuck Langpaul Jr. has been in the custom home business for more than a decade, so he thought he knew a thing or two about groundbreaking ceremonies: Hoist a shovel, snap a picture and it's done.

Then, a Hindu family in Great Falls asked him to build its home on ancient principles of Indian design. The groundbreaking occurred on a warm day decreed as auspicious by an astrological chart. A priest poured milk and honey on the ground and chanted mantras, asking the earth's forgiveness for the construction disturbance to come. Dozens of friends and relatives gathered and, when it was over, ate curry and rice from a buffet set up on card tables in the bare lot.

Langpaul was surprised, honored and a bit flustered by the two-hour-long ceremony. "I think they invited everyone they knew," he said. "It was culture shock for me."

As the Washington region's population of foreign-born residents tops 1 million, the influx is changing the way homes and subdivisions are built. Custom home builders are planning prayer rooms for Indian families and using feng shui, the Chinese art of home design, for Asian customers. They're fielding requests for white brick and mortar, rather than bricks made from Virginia clay, from customers who want to evoke the sun-baked dwellings of their Middle Eastern homelands.

Ram Balasubramanian, who immigrated to the United States in 1989, bought a home in a new South Riding subdivision in Loudoun County three years ago and spent \$220,000 on extras to modify it to traditional Indian design, including a prayer room.

"The architecture might be looking like the local American style of architecture, but the ambiance and friendliness, that is pretty much the way it is back home. It's what keeps us going," Balasubramanian said.

Even in the housing downturn, the trend is flourishing locally because home buyers now have the luxury of asking for special accommodations from builders or the leisure to look at several homes before selecting one that can fulfill their cultural needs, experts say.

"It's becoming more diverse, so there are a lot of options we're putting in homes we never had to think of before," said Gregg Hughes, general sales manager for Keswick Homes, a custom builder.

Foreign-born residents make up a growing share of U.S. homeowners at all income levels, but particularly first-time buyers, according to Zhu Xiao Di, a senior research analyst at the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University. Locally, foreign-born residents make up about 16 percent of recent home buyers in Maryland, 15 percent in Virginia and 12 percent in the District, according to the center's analysis of U.S. Census data.

Nationally, former U.S. Housing and Urban Development secretary Henry G. Cisneros is spearheading a movement to design homes and communities that will appeal to the Latino consumer, the fastest-growing segment of the population.

Last year, he edited a book on the subject, "Casa y Comunidad," for the National Association of Home Builders. The book advocates residential construction that meets the Latino community's needs, adding space for in-law suites for elderly parents and larger kitchens with roomier pantries and gas stoves. ("Only a gas oven works well for tortillas," the book says.)

"This is really critical because it will be one of the driving forces of the home-building industry going forward," Cisneros said. "The numbers are so powerful. A large percentage of the home buyers of the future are going to be minorities or persons that came as immigrants."

Three years ago, Centex Homes sales representatives who were marketing Grand Manor townhouses in the Lansdowne community in Loudoun noticed that Asian buyers avoided purchasing a model in which the stairs leading up from the foyer lined up exactly with the front door. They learned that such an alignment is bad feng shui. It portends that luck will run out of the home.

"It raised our awareness," said Char Kurihara, vice president of sales in Virginia for the Dallas-based builder. Now, they've largely abandoned the traditional center-hall, colonial floor plan in this region, a style ubiquitous in the outer suburbs, Centex officials said. They've also done more demographic research.

They learned that about 50 percent of likely buyers for their New Bristow Village community in Prince William County would be Latino families and other foreign-born residents, so they introduced a model with a den that could be converted into a bedroom for grandparents and a connected living and dining room that would give more space for large family parties.

Home builders in the South and West have begun building homes with more and smaller bedrooms than the traditional four-bedroom

house, also to appeal to some immigrant families in which many generations live under one roof.

However, the trend parallels the specter of illegal boarding houses -- large homes built with many small bedrooms that are then rented out, sometimes by an absentee landlord -- which has sparked controversy in Fairfax and Prince William counties. One Latino homeowner in the Falls Church area recently backed off plans to build a 13-bedroom, 13-bath home after neighborhood outcry.

But Fairfax Board of Supervisors member Penelope A. Gross (D-Mason) said many of the illegal boarding houses shut down by the county's code enforcement strike team are older ramblers.

"Just because someone builds a McMansion doesn't mean it's going to be a boarding house," Gross said.

Hindu priests at the Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham and the Rajdhani Mandir Temple in Chantilly have been advising a steady stream of immigrants from India, many of whom came to the region for the high-tech jobs at companies in the Dulles corridor, who want to buy or build their houses around the principles of vastu shastra. The calls have increased in the past two years because prospective home buyers now have many homes to choose from and can pick those designed closest to vastu shastra principles, the priests said.

Vastu shastra is the ancient Indian design philosophy that governs temple-building and is used now to create harmony in living spaces.

It suggests building homes facing east to soak up sunlight, for example, and placing the kitchen in the center as the symbolic heart of the home. Some Indian buyers have eschewed foreclosed homes because vastu shastra teaches that it's best to live in a home with positive energy, where the residents have been happy and prosperous.

Balasubramanian, 46, bought a home in The Retreat at South Village three years ago. The neighborhood appealed to Balasubramanian, a real estate agent, and his wife, Bharathi, because it is a locus for the fast-growing Indian community in Loudoun and western Fairfax. South Riding has an Indian community association that holds events around holidays such as Diwali, the Festival of Lights. The local Giant stocks such staples as dried lentils, yogurt and rice flour.

Several sheets of scratched-up blueprints later, he and his wife had their dream home, a suburban brick colonial built around the principles of vastu shastra. The home has a kitchen with a granite countertop in the center, a lamp-lit prayer room upstairs and a balcony off the master bedroom where tea can be sipped in the mornings.

Six Hindu priests chanted in the solarium at their crowded housewarming party, Balasubramanian said, and the air fairly hummed.

"I'm a big believer in creating positive energy," he said one recent evening as he and Bharathi, 42, who works for a local information technology firm, prepared dinner for their 13-year-old son, Mukundh, and other family members. (The couple's other son, Arun, is a sophomore at the University of Virginia.)

But the construction journey was not always peaceful. Bharathi Balasubramanian said it would have been easier and cheaper to put the prayer room in the basement. "I bugged him about it because I was not comfortable keeping God's room downstairs and walking on top of God," she said. "It didn't feel right."

They ended up carving a space for the prayer room, called a puja room, from the upstairs guest bathroom. It's her favorite place, where the family mediates or prays together. That evening, her sister-in-law, one of the dinner guests, knelt before the prayer room to pour rice flour on a board to draw an intricate pattern called a kolam, which she then drew again outside on the slate steps of the house, a Hindu tradition.

"It reminds you of your own childhood," Bharathi Balasubramanian said of the prayer room. "In India, everyone had their own puja room. It's a part of who you are basically . . . wherever you find your own niche, what's in your heart, invariably that's something from your childhood."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

; or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Cincinnati Home Builders](#)

Start Building Your Dream Home. See Our Portfolio Online Today!
ZickaWalkerHomes.com

[Custom Home Builders - OR](#)

Design Your Dream House. Find Floor Plans & Design Options. Contact Us!
www.ArborHomes.com

[homes builders](#)

Build With Dominion Homes Find Your Dream House
www.DominionHomes.com