

CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, August 6, 2004

An enduring appeal

Craftsman design shows resilience in construction, renovation across Charlotte

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Tess Gadwa](#)

After a long period of neglect by builders, the Craftsman design style is gaining widespread popularity in home construction and renovation. Across Dilworth, Elizabeth and Plaza-Midwood, pre-war Craftsman homes are being renovated and cherished for their architectural style. New construction, such as Wendover Hill, a community of "grand bungalows" near Wendover and Randolph roads, demonstrates how the style is enjoying the embrace of builders.

Sixteen of the 18 homes at Wendover Hill are sold, says Realtor Lori Byrum, who represents the project, at prices from the mid-\$500,000s to the \$800,000s. Designed individually by architect and builder Kevin Pfahl, the homes feature traditional Craftsman elements, such as signature roof brackets, custom windows and doors, and transoms.

The style appeared near the turn of the 20th century. Simple lines, abundant natural materials and light-filled interiors appealed to a population weary of the artificial, mass-produced trappings of the industrial age. Ample front porches promised a renewed connection to nature and the surrounding community. Bridging ornate traditional styles and stark modernism, its designs required a high degree of craftsmanship but were intended for casual, everyday living.

Builders largely abandoned the style by World War II. After a long hiatus, some local builders brought it back about a decade ago, and Craftsman homes have since found strong appeal among buyers.

Resale potential is part of that marketability. Two bungalow-style homes sold this year in Olmsted Park, a mid-1990s Dilworth infill project by MECA Properties. One sold for \$258,000, more than double the original price of \$124,500; the other sold for \$291,000 from initial pricing at \$185,500. Both houses have less than 2,000 square feet of heated space.

Charlotte architect Kent Lineberger says renovations of original Craftsman homes can range anywhere from a coat of paint to million-dollar projects. "There are a ton of Craftsman bungalows in this town," he says, "and if they're not already renovated, they're going to be."

Although Craftsman homes exist in many sizes and shapes, the bungalow is most often identified with the style. Originating in colonial India and deriving from the Hindi word *bangla*, a bungalow typically has one story, an overhanging low-pitched roof, and one or more porches.

While some early bungalows were designed on a grand scale, the building type could be constructed simply and cheaply, and was accessible to the middle class. Between 1908 and 1940, Sears, Roebuck & Co. sold more than 100,000 Craftsman kit homes, at prices between \$650 and \$2,500. The kits were shipped by rail and contained an average of 30,000 pieces, including 75 pounds of nails and 27 gallons of paint and varnish, as well as a 75-page instruction book. In 2001, a Sears Craftsman home in Chevy Chase, Md., sold for \$816,000.

Original Craftsman homes feature details such as built-in benches, bookcases and sideboards; wood trim; columns; and patterned tile fireplace surrounds. New homes include closet space, updated kitchens and bathrooms, and open floor plans.

Saussy Burbank first brought Craftsman designs to Charlotte suburbs in the late 1990s, with 500 units at Beverly Crest designed by architect Reg Narmour. "Early on, I believe that others may have been uncomfortable doing them or unwilling to go to the expense of designing and building," says company founder Jim Burbank. "It would have been impossible for us, if we did not have a subcontractor base that could execute the Craftsman details." Since then, the style has become the builder's trademark in communities throughout the Carolinas.

While some neo-traditional developments embrace the Craftsman style, such homes are most commonly found in a ring of established neighborhoods near Charlotte's center city. The location of these period bungalows and newer infill projects may account for part of their rising value. But Berny Delgado, broker and owner of Center City Realty, says even inside a neighborhood like Dilworth or Plaza-Midwood, "If your home was built prior to the 1940s it will sell faster, compared to a 1970s brick ranch." She adds that in post-World War II Charlotte neighborhoods such as Sedgefield, residents are adding new facades to brick ranches so that they resemble bungalows.

It's only in recent years that Craftsman home design has come full circle. The design was most influential between 1900 and 1915. When the style first appeared, it was seen as a radically simple alternative to Victorian homes, with their heavy reliance on ornamentation.

With roots in England's Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century, the Craftsman style came to the United States through architect and furniture designer Gustav Stickley's magazine, *The Craftsman*, and his books of house plans. While Craftsman design influenced modernists such as Frank Lloyd Wright, its popularity faded after World War I. By the end of World War II, home construction had abandoned the style almost entirely, displaced by demand for older styles or sleek, streamlined buildings.

So why has the style resurfaced, and what are its odds for survival in the new century? Many architects believe the new appeal of Craftsman homes can be linked to how they tie into their surrounding communities -- an expansive front porch and pedestrian-friendly curb appeal dovetail with principles of new urbanism.

Pfahl, whose interest in the style goes back to a seven-house infill project he designed in Plaza-Midwood during the mid-1980s, is working on Eagle Park, a traditional-style, 300-unit development in Belmont. He is optimistic about the Craftsman style's staying power, in part because of pressures shaping current residential housing patterns.

"Anything that has a style or character to it will have appeal as a way of creating sense of place," he says. "The trend is going to be denser development, and the old-style neighborhoods are great examples of dealing with higher density."

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