

‘Woman-centric’ houses all the rage

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The model home at Deer Brook in Exeter, a new development featuring woman-centric houses and condos.

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Most home builders are men, and as a rule, they are not known for being in touch with their feminine side, according to Warwick developer Hugh Fisher.

Over the years, Fisher estimates, he has built about 1,000 houses in Rhode Island — in Warwick, Coventry, South Kingstown, Narragansett, Cranston and Johnston. Fisher said he has always aimed to develop attractive houses with modern amenities in desirable locations.

But it wasn't until this summer, when he was well along with his new project, Deer Brook Estates, in Exeter, that Fisher decided to reapproach the design process with one primary question: What do women want?

Fisher said he was introduced to the concept of “woman-centric” home design at a two-day workshop, called a “think tank,” held by an Omaha, Neb., company, Design Basics Inc. Fisher said his wife, Vera Fisher, first heard about the woman-led company and urged him to attend the session.

Even though Fisher “had already started pouring the foundations” for the first new houses in Exeter, he was so impressed with the seminar that he immediately hired Design Basics to reconfigure his designs using woman-centric principles.

“I was blown away,” he said.

Fisher said all the units at Deer Brook, which is off South Country Trail, near the Rhode Island Veterans Cemetery, will be woman-centric. Plans call for 64 single-family houses, and 66 “age-qualified” [55-plus] condominiums.

According to Design Basics president Linda Reimer, women drive most of the decisions about new home buying. “Women make 85 percent or more of the decisions in anything having to do with a home,” she said. In addition to making the choice of a house plan 90 percent of the time, “she is also the influencing factor in how to change the home,” — that is, the options or upgrades buyers choose when builders offer them the chance to customize their new homes. “She generally makes those decisions, too,” Reimer said.

But even though home builders have long known that women are their target customers, “we’ve never asked them what they want,” Reimer said. She said her company did its own research and assembled focus groups to determine what things most women want in a new home. Design Basics started licensing the “Woman-centric” logo last year, and Reimer said the company has more than 70 licensees, which she said is proof that the company is filling a need in this male-dominated industry.

“No one had really told them how to design and sell to women,” she said.

Reimer said the company is now refining the Woman-centric product to cater to different types of women. She said women are turned off when they are approached by salespeople who assume all women have the same needs and desires.

Reimer, whose father was a home builder, had a first career as an educator; she was a preschool director for more than 20 years. She started working at Design Basics in an entry-level, part-time position, copying blueprints, in 1992. She transferred to a part-time marketing job in 1993. In September 2003 she launched Her Home, a quarterly home-building magazine aimed at women. Not everyone thought it was a great idea. “They said, ‘You can’t do that. You’ll ’” she said. Unlike home decorating magazines, Her Home focuses on ‘alienate men,’ women’s ideas about home design and construction.

By 1995, Reimer was running the human resources department of Design Basics Inc., and she became president in 1997.

Fisher’s model single-family home at Deer Brook, in Exeter, which will be opened to the public next month, incorporates the core woman-centric principles, which include having areas for entertaining and de-stressing, ample storage and flexible design. And even though the model house at Deer Brook is not a McMansion — it is under 2,000 square feet and priced in the \$300,000s — there is an attention to detail not often seen at this relatively moderate price point.

At the model, the entry into the house from the garage (in the model, the garage space is finished and will be used as a sales center) features an important element in woman-

centric homes: what Reimer calls “the drop zone.” This is a place for the homeowner to drop everything she might be carrying when she arrives home with or without children — keys, handbag, mail, and groceries — that is distinctly not the kitchen counter. The “woman-centric” point here is that clutter is stressful, and the kitchen should be a place to prepare food and gather with family and friends.

In the Deer Brook model, the “drop zone” consists of a granite-topped counter and a cabinet with cubbyholes for mail. An outlet above the counter gives the owner a place to recharge up to four electronic devices such as cell phones, mp3 players, laptops, and Blackberries. Across from the “drop zone” is a walk-in pantry with built-in shelving with plenty of space for storage of dry goods. So if the owner buys a 12-pack of paper towels, that’s where it goes; she doesn’t have to put 11 rolls in the basement.

“Women love pantries,” Fisher said.

The downstairs living area is designed as an open space, to give owners the option to use different areas for different purposes. There is an option to install French doors on a room to make it more private or closed-off, if, for instance, an owner wanted to use the space as a home office, Fisher said.

The model house has a laundry room on the second floor, near the bedrooms. This room also has shelving and cabinet storage, and an area for ironing clothes. “Women hate going to the basement to do the laundry,” he said.

Other details at the model house include a window seat, a window box, a driveway made with stone pavers rather than plain asphalt, a front porch with mahogany decking and thick pillars, and a front door framed by small windows. The doorbell surround is black with a floral motif.

Every counter in the model is granite-topped; the downstairs floors are oak, with boards a bit wider than standard; the walls are painted in soft yellows and blues, are bordered with 5¼-inch crown molding, and have curved archways. The interior lighting fixtures and chandeliers are stylish; even the metal lawn light fixtures, shaped like tulips, have an unusual twist. All the closets are fitted with shelves and cubbies, not just one hanging rod and one overhead shelf.

Upstairs, the master bedroom has a vaulted ceiling, and the walk-in closet is accessed through the master bathroom. The master bath has a shower stall big enough for two, and another closet for bath items.

Women notice all these details, and appreciate them, Fisher said.

“These are things my wife has been telling me for 30 years,” he said with a laugh. “But we [men] don’t listen.”

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