

# 'Woman-centric' housing: not just for women only

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hode Island developer Hugh Fisher estimates that he had built close to 1,100 houses before he discovered the concept of "woman-centric"

home building in 2008. Hugh's daughter, Sarah, suggested he attend a conference in Tennessee on woman-centric homes and he admits he was "completely closed to the idea." As it turned out, Sarah's instincts were excellent because despite his initial skepticism, her father was completely inspired by the workshop.

Fisher was so impressed by woman-centric design that he called his project manager later that day and told him to stop construction on the conventional development he was building – Deer Brook, situated on 164 acres on Route 2 in Exeter – because he intended to build it as a woman-centric development.

Once Fisher committed to the woman-centric concept, he had to re-train his subcontractors and recalls that "not everybody made the cut. Some of the guys just weren't open to this new way of doing things and I had to let them go." Fisher now employs female designers, decorators and lighting experts to shape the details that are important to women.

The idea behind the Design Basics Woman-Centric approach is to design everything in a home, from the exterior fascia to the interior drawer pulls, with women in mind. According to Design Basics's Web site, women are the primary purchasers or decision-makers in the acquisition of a new home, therefore, the approach to selling a home is also designed for women. Both men and women greatly appreciate the stress-free prix fixe approach to home buying that packs a wealth of detail into the

Deb Ricciarelli was among the first people to buy a single-family home in Deer Brook Estates in Exeter, with features designed with women in mind. The living room of the model condominium (below) includes an open floor plan with a fireplace that is also open to the sunroom.



Story by Liz McDonald  
Photos by Michael Derr

selling price.

As Fisher explains it, “Women tend to notice the details. When they see something they like, they look more closely at it to see what it is exactly that is attracting them. They notice the peaks, stones and columns on the outside of a house, whereas men tend to take the structure at face value. The men see a house, but the women can picture a home.”

Deer Brook houses are filled with amenities that make perfect sense. Take for example, the “drop zone” that is designed to capture the tide of mail, cell phones and clutter that would normally collect on the

kitchen table. The drop zone, right next to the door leading in from the garage, features a charging station for laptops, phones and MP3 players. There is also a coat closet and a pantry close to the door that makes it easy for the inhabitants to stow their coats instead of draping them over the kitchen chairs.

The drop zone is just one of many thoughtful and practical details that strongly appeal to women. For the men, the houses feature a basement hideaway complete with radiant heat in the floors and electrical service for a fridge and a flat-screen TV.

Men and women both respond to the Woman-Centric commitment to “de-stressing.” The family-friendly floor plan ensures that stress levels remain low long after the

closing. For example, the “flex-space” off the kitchen keeps the family close by, but not underfoot, so that the cook is not isolated while the rest of the family unwinds at the end of the day.

Deer Brook is a thriving community of couples, families with children and single people of both sexes and all ages. In fact, the neighborhood is so diverse that Fisher said it is difficult to say who the average Deer Brook resident is.

Deb Ricciarelli, one of the first to move in, says, “I’ll never forget the day I saw the model home, I said to my husband, ‘This is the house I want to live in.’ I loved it.”

Deer Brook is peaceful. As Ricciarelli describes it, “Once you drive through the gates, you leave the rest of the world behind you.” The houses, ranging in cost from \$300,000 to \$700,000, are approximately 1,900 square feet and fit comfortably into the gently rolling landscape. The Deer Brook color palette for the exterior paint is tasteful and muted, and most of the residents have ornamental plants in their front lawn. There are plans afoot for three walking trails, and about half of the development is designated as open space.

Ricciarelli and her husband, Lou, moved to Deer Brook in 2008 and fell in love with the friendly and tranquil atmosphere. When Lou died unexpectedly nine months later, the neighbors kept an eye on Deb to make sure she was all right. As a tribute to Lou,

who everyone affectionately called “The Mayor of Deer Brook,” Fisher and the neighbors pooled their resources, rolled up their sleeves and surprised Deb with a beautiful memorial garden that they had built themselves.

“The most important thing about living here, besides my beautiful home, is the people living here,” Ricciarelli said. “People sit out on their porches, your neighbor waves to you when you walk by. Everybody takes such pride in their surroundings.”

Steve Riley and his wife, Michelle Nealon, moved into one of the condos at



Jennifer and Larry Dame, shown home-schooling daughter Sarah, are one of a number of families who enjoy the woman-centric design of Deer Brook Estates. They moved to the development in November 2009. Most of the houses have already been sold.



the development in January 2009. Steve had read a story about the development in the Sunday paper and was so curious about it that he immediately put down the newspaper and drove to Exeter in a snowstorm to tour the model home. Impressed by the detail built into the house, he made a down payment that day. Asked how he initially responded to the idea of Woman-Centric design, Steve says, “It got my attention – it was a positive. I loved it.”

Over the past few years there have been regular community events at Deer Brook that Ricciarelli says contribute to the sense of community. There have been demonstrations put on by Pottery Barn and Schartner Farm, not mention fund-raisers such as the one held in Lou Ricciarelli’s memory to benefit the Animal Rescue League of Southern Rhode Island.

Despite the crippling recession and dreadful real estate market, Deer Brook has been a success. Since the first open house two years ago, Fisher has sold 64 of the 66 single-family homes and all 66 condos with no plans for a second phase.



The kitchen of a model condominium at Deer Brook Estates includes an open floor plan with an island for easy entertaining.

Contractors from all over the country have toured the development and the project has been written about nationally.

When asked about the appeal of Woman-Centric housing to men, Fisher jokes, “The

men only want to know ‘Where do I eat, and is my wife happy with this?’”

*For more information about Deer Brook, visit [www.thestonealliance.com](http://www.thestonealliance.com).*