

Buyers seeking homes with a woman's touch

By Chris Church
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About a year ago, veteran housing developer Hugh Fisher began construction on his latest project, Deer Brook Estates in Exeter.

Situated on 164 acres adjacent to the Rhode Island Veteran's Cemetery, the 130-unit development was on track to be typical of the ones Fisher had built over the last three decades until one hyphenated word changed all of that: women-centric.

A self-described "typical cement-head guy," Fisher said he was dubious when he first heard of the concept from his daughter, but after attending a builders' conference centered on the idea at the insistence of his wife, he was no longer a skeptic.

"I sat through the conference for the first half hour like a typical guy, and then suddenly I realized that these people were on to something," he said. "I had already started pouring the cement foundation for the [Deer Brook Estates] homes, when I changed the plans from plain-Jane homes to real knockout homes."

A Warwick-based developer, Fisher said he has built nearly 1,000 homes throughout the state and that he immediately saw the appeal of these distinctive and practical home designs. He said he jumped at the opportunity to be one of the first women-centric home developers in the Ocean State.

"I already have 90 deposits down for these houses," he said during a recent tour of one of the homes. "I can't build them fast enough. It's amazing."

The perspective-altering conference that Fisher attended was held by Design Basics Inc., a Nebraska-based home plan design firm that is the leader of the hot new trend that has been gaining popularity with builders throughout the country.

But what exactly makes a women-centric home?

Paul Foresman, director of business development for Design Basics, said things began when the company's market research showed that that women make nearly 80 percent of homebuilding and remodeling decisions and 91



PHOTOS: MICHAEL DERR

Deer Brook Estates in Exeter is a local example of women-centric homes, a new trend that focuses on what women are looking for in a home, like open kitchens with expansive counter space. The concept is based on research that shows women make nearly 80 percent of homebuilding and remodeling decisions and 91 percent of home-buying decisions.

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"There are four elements that make a women-centric home," he explained. "Women tend to use four lenses when looking at a house. They see it as a place for entertaining, a place for de-stressing, an area that can be flexible and serve different needs and a place for storage and organization."

With more than 100 builders across the country who have purchase the company's women-centric designs for about \$1,000 apiece, Foresman said their designs and schematics are formulated after designers immersed themselves in focus groups to research what most women want from their homes.

"We get inspired by the things women say they are tired of putting up with or are looking for a solution for," he said.

One of the first things you notice when entering a women-centric home is an area that is referred to as a



"drop zone," which Foresman and Fisher both said puts a smile on the face of women when they enter the home.

"When somebody first

walks through the door to their home, they usually have an armful of stuff, whether it be your keys, laptop, milk or the mail, and it usually ends up on the

kitchen counter," Foresman said. "Most of the homes we've created have a foyer, not a mudroom, but an area with a countertop, key hooks, mail slots and a



PHOTO: MICHAEL DERR

Researchers found that storage and space were two issues that women focused on when looking for a home, so the bedrooms in women-centric homes often have large walk-in closets.

bench. Something that can serve as a drop zone and allow you to take your shoes off.”

While many kitchens can be cramped and contain just the bare essentials (stove, sink, counter and cupboards) the women-centric home treats the kitchen as more of a flexible entertainment room where guests can gather and still be in close proximity to the host as he or she prepares fare.

With expansive counter space and the elimination of walls that can leave the cook feeling shut off, the capacious dining area and kitchen creates a sense of “flow” to the home, according to Fisher.

Building design plays a major part in the feel of the home, but the addition of certain types of amenities can make a world of difference in the home as well.

Foresman, who describes the company’s approach to home design as “holistic,” said that most women-centric homes utilize products that are low-maintenance, convenient and environmentally responsible.

“Most people, not just women, want a home that is quiet, so many of our homes have quieter garbage disposal engines and ceiling fans as well as a special brand of drywall that blocks out noise,” he said. “It costs a little more, but the customers will pay for the conven-

ience.”

No women-centric home would be complete without a bathroom that serves as a comfortable retreat where women can take a relaxing bath and de-stress from the worries of the day. Foresman said men who design homes tend to be utilitarian, and he pointed to the use of the bathroom as a good example of this.

“[Men] tend to be in and out of the bathroom in about 10 minutes, while women tend to spend up to half an hour, so we try to emphasize comfort in our bathrooms,” he said. “We try to avoid cramped spaces and put in a small bench where women can sit down and put their makeup on.”

Bathrooms offer several features to choose from, including multiple shower heads that massage the body, dual faucets on large countertops and, of course, enormous walk-in closets that can be used to store enough shoes and clothing for a small family.

“I always tell people what one of my landscape architects said about these homes,” Fisher said. “He said to me: ‘This is the home that everyone dreams of, but can’t afford. Now they can afford it.’”

With prices starting at around \$385,000 at Deer Brook Estate, the homes may not be affordable for everyone but he said the homes

come “fully loaded” with features and details both big and small.

The buildings, which range in size from 1,368 square feet to 1,771 square feet, have nine-foot ceilings, granite countertops, airy walk-in closets, Venetian backsplashes, custom doorbells and designer faucet fixtures that all add to the allure of the homes.

“These houses just click with women from as soon as

you pull up in the driveway,” Fisher said.

Another developer who recently discovered the popularity of the women-centric trend is Bunny Dennison, vice president of Reflection Homes in Uniontown, Ohio. Dennison said she was first introduced to the concept after reading a magazine article about women-centric homes and “absolutely fell in love with the idea.”

Shortly thereafter, she was on a plane to attend a Design Basic conference in Omaha and was soon in the women-centric home design business in Ohio.

“Most of the houses that were being built in my area were all three- to four-bedroom boxes with no curb appeal.”

She said that Reflection Homes has sold 15 women-centric homes since last July without much advertising, a sign that indicates the popular concept is one that people have been quietly clamoring for.

A seemingly basic concept, all three developers said the reason the approach has taken so long to come to the forefront of home design is because the majority of architects and designers in the business are men.

“Our industry is mostly male-dominated, and because of that, they tend to communicate better with males and the male really isn’t the one making those

decisions,” Dennison said. “The woman is.”

Her homes are not as pricey as others on the market, and she said she has built women-centric homes for as low as \$130,000.

The focal point, Dennison said, is the livability of a home.

“Square footage isn’t really that important, it’s how the house lives,” she said. “You can take a small home and make it live big.”

Design Basics sells their building designs for about \$1,000 and Foresman also emphasized the impact that amenities can have on a home. As an example, it costs about \$5,000 to add women-centric amenities on to a standard \$300,000 home, but the difference is immense.

“We’re talking about the difference between an apple and an orange just because of a few amenities,” he said.

Fisher, Foresman and Dennison all said that designs for women-centric homes are a continually evolving concept as more and more feedback is received. Although the homes are geared toward women, the simple concepts are based on common sense.

“It’s not just women that love it, it’s men too,” Dennison said. “We’ve had men come into one of our model houses and say: ‘Oh my God, I’ve got to go and get my wife to come in here.’”



PHOTO: MICHAEL DERR

Women-centric homes often feature airy living rooms for entertainment, as shown in one of the model homes at Deer Brook Estates.