

Builder Wise

SEPTEMBER 2006

A smaller
footprint
but a bigger
lifestyle

Homebuyers demand luxury
in trendy smaller homes.
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Atlanta Gas Light



Go With The Glow

Natural Gas Utilities

Atlanta Gas Light

Chattanooga Gas

Elizabethtown Gas

Elkton Gas

Florida City Gas

Virginia Natural Gas



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Builder Wise

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Mondo Condos

ON THE RISE

Build it big, pack it with luxury features, and it's a high-rise condo sure to please an important market segment.

BY JANE SCHREIER JONES

M

ove over, modest. Make way for mega-luxury.

A noteworthy segment of the new-housing market, comprised of everyone from seniors to young professionals, is opting for the condominium lifestyle to avoid house maintenance, upkeep, yard work and other time-killers. But hang on. These people have no intention of moving into a scaled-down, moderately priced, ho-hum environment.

They want a super-sized, glamour-packed condominium to reflect their position and their love for luxury living. This segment of the market is attracted to custom cabinetry, 10-foot ceilings, marble master baths, a cook's kitchen, and floor plans with space a plenty.

Builders and developers are fulfilling this new American dream with high-rise condos of 3,000 to 5,000 square feet – and more. A high-rise is a viable way to give more people a big space even in a crowded urban area, while high-rises overlooking water let more condo owners enjoy spectacular views.

The market

People attracted to these colossal condos have more than a healthy portfolio. They have a desire to be where the action is, whether that's downtown Atlanta, Memphis or a smaller urban area, or in resorts, or along the Gulf or Atlantic coasts.

Three distinctive groups make up the mega-condo market. First are on-the-rise young professionals, some with children, who want the easy and elegant lifestyle of high-rise condo living. In previous decades, they might have purchased a big house in the suburbs, but now they want to be close to work and work-outs, plus nightlife and other city attractions.

Another market segment is baby boomers moving from their primary residences. They want to trade their lawnmowers or snow shovels for tennis racquets or golf clubs. A third group is baby boomers and seniors buying a high-rise condo as a second residence. But they want large floor plans so the kids, grandkids and friends can visit. In fact, studies show that many people now want the same space in their second residence as they enjoy in their primary residence. Builders with an eye to the future realize that by 2030, people 65 and older will number about 70 million, double the number in 1987.

Wowing the seen-it-alls

Builders and developers know that luxury condominiums must be packed with people-pleasing features, innovative design and custom offerings. Natural-gas indoor heating is the most popular form of home heating in the United States, so smart developers make sure they give people what they want. Natural-gas heat feels warmer than electric because the air is heated to 120 degrees, compared to a heat pump's output of only 95 degrees; plus, natural-gas heat doesn't produce cool drafts.

Throughout the condo, buyers need to be wowed by features such as wide-open floor plans, ceramic tile, wainscoting and elegant wall finishes, top-of-the-line fixtures and innovative lighting.

Residents of The Phoenix on Peachtree in Buckhead, regarded as Atlanta's premier neighborhood, enjoy many extras in their 26-story building, such as an exclusive media room, on-call masseur, the opportunity to entertain in the Grand Salon and other luxuries. "Building a luxury condo high-rise like The Phoenix on Peachtree means packing it with features people love," says Al Nash, vice president of The Columns Group, Inc. "For instance, of course people want fireplaces, but they don't want those fireplaces with a fake glow. A natural-gas fireplace like we put in The Phoenix on Peachtree gives the fireplace the authentic look and experience that people want.

"Plus, natural-gas appliances help give people the lifestyle they want. A luxury kitchen with natural gas gives a professional feel to a kitchen."

Chris Bilbo, project manager for Bayvista, located on Virginia Beach's bayfront in Ocean Park, agrees: "These buyers even want granite countertops in the laundry room. We are loading these condos with luxury appointments, including spectacular windows so owners can enjoy an incredible view of the water."

Bayvista is the latest project of S.B. Ballard Construction Company. It's a 27-unit building with spacious floor plans ranging from 2,250 to 4,400 square feet. These single-level residences feature three bedrooms, master suites with private balconies, breakfast areas that open onto private terraces, and formal dining rooms with tray ceilings. Prices range from \$930,000 to more than \$2 million.

Salespeople know that when a kitchen gets a jaw-dropping reaction, that often cinches the sale. The kitchens at Bayvista feature custom-designed cabinetry with choice of finishes and door fronts, granite countertops, wine

coolers, tile or hardwood floor and stainless steel appliances. "Plus, we make sure we provide extras," Bilbo says. "For instance, we do exterior venting so when people are cooking a batch of crabs, their home doesn't smell like seafood for days."

Fully featured natural-gas ranges turn a glamorous kitchen into a cook's kitchen. Natural-gas ranges respond instantly and

give the cook total control. Foods cook faster and more evenly with natural gas. Mondo condo owners often select the biggest and the best natural-gas ranges that manufacturers offer.

Buyers of Bayvista and other high-rise luxury condos can also select a natural-gas water heater. Gas flames provide instant heat, which means a gas water heater heats more water per hour than an electric water heater, especially important when out-of-town visitors need to shower.

"We're also using natural gas to heat the individual residences and the common areas, and we're using it to heat the pool because it's more efficient and will keep the water warmer," Bilbo reports.

Think beyond the basics

Luxury cannot be limited to living quarters. Condo owners value their free time, so offering features such as a concierge, business services, pet walking, dry cleaning and laundry, maid service, high speed elevators, and valet parking go a long way to making a sale. Some developments offer a business center, climate-controlled wine storage, and closed-circuit TV security system.

Resort-style recreation means offering more than a heated swimming pool. Mega-condo owners love having a clubhouse, fitness center, meeting facilities with catering capabilities, basketball and racquetball courts, and a billiards room.

"It's all about freedom," Bilbo concludes. "Freedom to travel when you want and come home to a beautiful, luxurious condominium that offers a lifestyle of enjoyment." 🏠



Bayvista condos are loaded with luxury appointments.

T

The rapidly rising prices of all energy sources have had little effect on how consumers choose to heat their homes. The advantages of natural gas for cooking, clothes drying, water heating and home heating continue to make natural gas the preferred source of energy for a variety of reasons.

"I believe the distinct advantage in favor of natural gas, and the reason that we steer people toward it, is that a gas furnace delivers a better supply of heat to your home or business than a heat pump will," says Ken Haines, president of Coolray Heating, Cooling/Mr. Plumber.

Coolray has been serving homeowners and businesses for 40 years and is nationally recognized as one of the most knowledgeable heating, cooling, plumbing and indoor air quality contractors in the country. The company, which serves the greater Atlanta area, maintains an unblemished record with the Better Business Bureau and has been recognized with several local and national awards and certifications.

"Comfort is the key benefit of natural gas heating and gives it a significant advantage," Haines stresses. "When you're cold, a gas furnace is going to deliver warm air for your home or business air from a heat pump system never feels warm."

One reason for its higher comfort factor is that natural-gas furnaces deliver a much hotter temperature to the room, thereby heating the space more quickly, according to Haines. "The temperature that comes out of the vents on a gas furnace is typically between 120 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit," he explains. "A heat pump, at its best, is delivering 96 to 100 degrees. If your home is cold, the heat pump just won't satisfy."

In fact, a natural-gas furnace provides heat that is 20 to 40 degrees warmer than an electric heat pump, which typically produces cool to lukewarm air at the heat register. So a home heated with gas will feel warmer than one heated with a heat pump.

Haines says that part of the reason for that differential is that heat pumps produce a damper heat. "It just doesn't do the same job from a comfort level that a gas furnace does. With a gas furnace, you turn it on and your house gets warm pretty quick. A heat pump takes much longer to get you there. And on really cold days, it can't get you there"



AND THE WINNER IS...

With so many advantages, it's no wonder more consumers prefer natural-gas heating.

BY JACK MCGEE

More efficient

Its greater efficiency gives natural gas another distinct advantage over heat pumps, according to Haines. New higher efficiency gas furnaces have made natural gas one of the most cost-effective energy sources available today. Gas furnaces not only provide comfort by bringing a steady flow of warm air, they also heat the home faster while using less energy. Additional features, such as pilot-less ignition and zone heating, make natural gas more desirable for homeowners.

"Homebuyers are taking advantage of the high efficiency gas furnaces on the market today," says Haines. "It is very advantageous and saves money on your heating bill. The technology has come a long way to where you can get all the way up to 96 percent efficiency."

Haines says that gas furnaces offer maintenance advantages as well. “From a servicing and from a technical standpoint, a gas furnace typically is easier to work on. It’s not as technically complicated as a heat pump.”

In addition, natural gas furnaces often last twice as long as heat pumps. Because they operate year-round for heating and cooling, heat pumps typically must be replaced in 10 to 12 years. By contrast, gas furnaces often last nearly 20 years.

Not surprisingly, its distinct advantages have made natural gas the preferred source of energy for most of today’s homebuyers. Of all new homes built, more than 70 percent use natural gas as the main central heating system. Having natural gas raises the resale value of a home as well, according to surveys which demonstrate that seven out of 10 homeowners prefer the comfort and convenience of natural gas.

“We put in a lot of gas furnaces,” Haines notes. “People who have a gas furnace stay with a gas furnace. We never have anyone who wants to convert. People who convert from a heat pump to a gas furnace, which happens from time to time, are very satisfied with their decision.”

Growth of split service

To meet the steady consumer demand for natural gas for new homebuyers, developers are increasingly utilizing split service in many of their new communities. The process involves a single natural-gas service feeding two adjacent residential lots or homes by making one service tap and splitting the service for two meter locations.

“In other words, with split service one line runs from the street and



New higher efficiency gas furnaces have made natural gas one of the most cost-effective energy sources available today.

splits off into two houses,” explains Scott Grogan, supervisor, Construction Operations for AGL. “It’s less expensive for the builder than running a separate line to each house.”

Utilizing the split-service process has other advantages for developers as well. It eliminates sidewalk cuts made on future gas service connections, eliminates drilling under the street to tap into the main gas line, reduces gas service installation time, and eliminates excess footage charges that may result when the gas meter is located farther away than the standard five feet.

Builders who adopt the split-service approach merely have to ensure that the gas fuel lines exit the structure in a predetermined location, which is established by Atlanta Gas Light, according to Grogan. The process itself is invisible for the homebuyer.

“AGL is always looking to improve natural gas service efficiency at the best cost,” Grogan concludes. “Since last year, rising fuel cost has driven material and construction costs higher. We want to continue to maintain our cost to serve, if not lower it, with smarter practices like the split-service process.” 🏠



Mike Baptist of Haven Properties, now an EPA award-winning builder, didn't start out that way.



The SCIENCE of building

BY LIBBY L. EVANS

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hen the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) presented its awards for excellence in a ceremony in Washington, D.C., last spring, only a dozen homebuilders were named as an Energy Star® 2006 Partner of the Year. These dozen builders were selected from a field of 2,500 builders nationwide participating in the Energy Star Program.

The only Georgia homebuilder to receive the prestigious award was Haven Properties, represented at the ceremony by president Mike Baptist. "Haven Properties is committed to building high performance homes using Energy Star and EarthCraft construction techniques," Baptist said. "Our homes have better indoor quality, minimized moisture intrusion and energy efficiency. On top of that, as the EPA points out, we're helping maintain a better environment for homeowners' families and our own families in the coming generations."

Haven Properties, headquartered in Alpharetta, Ga., was founded by Baptist in 1993; now a team of 32 people builds between 125 and 150 homes per year. The company has constructed close to 200 Energy Star homes in metro Atlanta since becoming an Energy Star partner in 2004. That same year, Haven Properties was named an EarthCraft House Builder of the Year.

For all his awards and commitment to the environment, Baptist admits he began thinking about the environment and his contribution to it because of – well, lawsuits and mold. "Back in 1999 or so, there were some large law suits in this industry on mold claims," he recalls.

Giving homebuyers what they want also means using natural gas in all homes in Haven Properties neighborhoods.



“Insurance companies were starting to get concerned, and we started looking at what was causing it. I was a second-generation homebuilder, and we were building houses like everybody else. I didn’t even think there was a science to building. You start with a little concrete, put some two-by-fours on top of it, shingles, drywall, flash it to keep water from getting inside, that’s how you build a house.”

But as Baptist looked into how to prevent mold, he found better ways of flashing, such as flashing openings before the windows are set and then flashing the windows. His investigation led him to EarthCraft, an Atlanta-based green building program that serves as a blueprint for healthy, comfortable homes that reduce utility bills and protect the environment, and Haven Properties began building under the EarthCraft name in 2001.

“We really started all this because of indoor air quality, not energy efficiency,” he says. “But as we got started, we got educated, and we found that a house with excellent indoor air quality is more energy efficient. And there really is a science to building quieter, tighter houses with superior energy efficiency.”

If you build it, they will save

Baptist says just about everything Haven Properties does is different from other homebuilders. “We use the same materials but we do everything different,” he says. “Before the house is built, we send the engineer’s site plan to our HVAC contractor, and the house’s HVAC system is sized based on the orientation of that particular floor plan on that particular lot. Most builders put the same tonnage in regardless of location, so it’s likely to be oversized or undersized but very seldom will it be properly sized.

“We waterproof our basements differently. We put a soil-gas vent in, from the slab to the roof. Also, in framing our houses, we use a framing technique that allows us to put insulation behind the wall at intersecting points. We frame the outside corners differently so we can wrap insulation behind them.”

All homes now built by Haven Properties are Energy Star homes. The

company is currently building distinctive neighborhoods in Cherokee, Cobb, Dawson, Douglas, Forsyth and Fulton counties. While the company does build some homes in the low \$500,000 and one community that’s in the \$700,000 - \$800,000 range, Haven Properties houses mainly range from the mid to the upper \$300,000s. The company prefers doing large master planned communities. “Our diversification is through location, not price points,” Baptist says. “We do a good job of learning about the customers and what they want.”

Giving homebuyers what they want also means using natural gas in all homes in Haven Properties neighborhoods. “We offer natural-gas heat because our customers like how it makes you feel warm,” Baptist says. “But it’s more than that. Natural gas means lower utility bills for our customers, so we use direct-vent water heaters and 90-percent furnaces.”

Homebuyers of Haven Properties are given a choice of electric or natural-gas cook tops. “Pretty close to 99 percent of customers pick natural-gas cooking,” Baptist says. “It’s instant heat and easy to regulate.”

Marketing advantage?

Does building an energy-efficient house make a difference to prospective homebuyers? Baptist, a frequent speaker on Energy Star, EarthCraft and energy efficiency, is candid about the role that energy efficiency plays in the home shopping process. “Around 99 percent of the people first pick the geographic location they want,” he says. “Then they ask, ‘Which

neighborhoods are in the area I want, with houses at my price level?’”

Baptist says a homebuyer might narrow it down to six neighborhoods, and then they start looking at particular features they want in a house, such as a master down, basement, private backyard – whatever. Baptist says that it’s usually when a few houses are “in the running” that energy efficiency plays a role – and an important role.

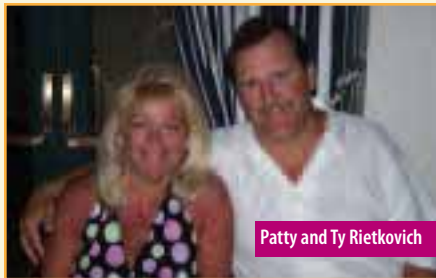
“Energy efficiency, and

building an Energy Star House or an EarthCraft Home, can be the tie-breaker,” he says. “When two or more houses are in a neighborhood the customer likes, with the right features and price, having one of the houses being an energy-efficient house often tips the scales and makes the sale.

“Homebuilders often think the customers don’t really care about energy efficiency, because most homeowners don’t mention it up front,” Baptist points out. “But it can be critical at the end of the decision-making process, the time when the decision to buy is being made. And that’s most important of all.” 🏠



Natural gas plays an integral role in building quality, energy-efficient homes.



Patty and Ty Rietkovich



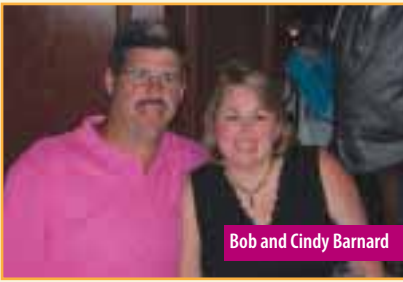
NAHB President David Pressly and wife Tammy



Allen and Ann Richardson

HBAG CONVENTION 2006

The Home Builders Association of Georgia held its 52nd annual convention July 19-23 at the Westin Rio Mar Beach & Spa Resort in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico. One of the many highlights of the convention was dinner at the renowned restaurant Palio, where these pictures were taken.



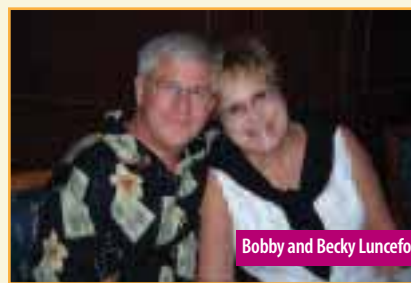
Bob and Cindy Barnard



Hector and Octavia Lopez



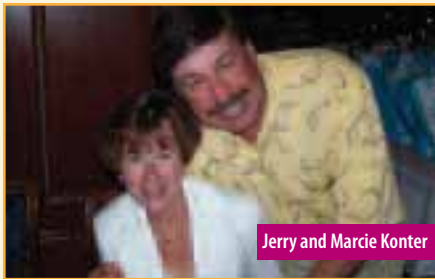
Jerry and Annette Tedder



Bobby and Becky Lunceford



Mark and Jo Ann Herbert



Jerry and Marcie Konter



Jim and Lynn Caswell



Griffin and Maxine White



Kurt and Malinda Cannon



Connie and Barry Burney



George and Hilda McClure



Greg and Denene Wallace



Bill and Sharon Gandy

Meet your AGL Reps in Georgia



Name: Adam Brown
Title: Sr. Account Executive
Territory: Top 50 Builders
Number of years with AGL: 1 ½
Favorite house style: Craftsman, open floor plan for entertaining.

Favorite room in the house and why: Kitchen, because I love to eat, and this is where lots of great conversations happen.

Favorite music: Country

Hobbies: Softball, fishing, camping, working in the yard

Favorite gas appliance and why: Range – you can't beat a gas range in the kitchen.



Name: Randy Flowers
Title: Senior Account Executive
Territory: Major Account Builders, State-wide
Number of years with AGL: 21
Favorite house style: Traditional two-story (especially if it's on the lake or beach)

Favorite room in the house and why: Kitchen – I love to cook on my gas range.

Favorite music: Contemporary Christian, '80s Rock

Hobbies: Golf, fishing, coaching youth sports

Favorite gas appliance and why: Gas light, because it represents the history of Atlanta Gas Light. When one of my customers installs gas lights in a new subdivision, it's as if we are continuing the legacy of AGL in a new era.



Name: Kenneth Lamar Crump
Title: Account Executive
Territory: Gas Advantage Department
Number of years with AGL: 39
Favorite house style: Ranch
Favorite room in the house and why: Den, because it's

where the TV is located.

Favorite music: Country

Hobbies: Antiques and raising cattle

Favorite gas appliance and why: Gas grill, because you can cook out anytime by just turning on the grill. You don't have to wait for charcoal to get hot.



Name: Ann Massey
Title: Realtor Representative
Territory: AGL Resources franchises
Number of years with AGL: 18
Favorite house style: Contemporary
Favorite room in the house and why: Kitchen, because I

enjoy cooking.

Favorite music: Rock 'n' Roll and Bluegrass

Hobbies: Cooking and basket weaving

Favorite gas appliance and why: Natural Gas cook top, because of the controllability of the natural-gas flame.

Thanks, Home Builders,
for including us
in your plans.



Atlanta Gas Light
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Computer-controlled grill

The new Cal Flame Smart Grill combines two things people love: computers and natural-gas grills.

Instead of knobs and valves, the Cal Flame Smart Grill has a touch-panel interface with digital controls, operated by an integrated computer that automates the grilling process. But bringing computerization to backyard grilling is not just a “wow” factor. Ease of use and safety factors are built-in. There’s a button for each of the following: on/off switch, temperature gauge, timers,



Automatic shut-off is an outstanding safety feature.

convection controls and lighting. There’s no accidentally lighting this grill, since two buttons must be pressed simultaneously to light it.

Another safety factor becomes important when the backyard chef hurries off to start enjoying the food and forgets to shut off the grill. The Smart Grill’s electronic

shut-off valves ensure that if it is unused for an hour, it shuts off automatically.

With no knobs or valves, this grill is a beauty with its sleek, no-fuss style. The stainless-steel Smart Grill is said to be 25 percent larger than comparable grills, too.

The Smart Grill takes the guesswork out of barbecuing and gives the homeowner a new way to enjoy natural-gas grilling. The Cal Flame Smart Grill is available for \$2,999 in retail stores, which are listed at www.calspas.com.

The 411

Visit these Web sites for useful information for yourself and your customers.

www.google.com/alerts

Google Alerts are email updates of the latest relevant Google results (web, news, etc.) on the subjects of your choice. It’s a great way to keep current on competitors, your industry or developing news stories.



www.buygasappliances.com

This site will give you information on the newest natural gas products available, such as gas lights, lanterns, grills, ranges, water heaters and more. Plus, natural gas experts can answer your questions via phone or e-mail to help you choose the perfect product for your needs. It’s rare to find such a wide selection of natural gas appliances in one place.



Vent caps keep the high-rise looking good

Direct-vent, natural-gas fireplaces are popular with people shopping for a condo and often help to make the sale. After all, people love the ambiance and warmth of a fireplace, and a natural-gas, direct-vent model gives the advantages of a fireplace while providing higher efficiencies and preserving indoor air quality.

But while the fireplaces attract attention, the termination caps on the outside of the buildings don’t have to. Architects and builders are looking to

products like High-Rise Termination Caps from Hearth & Home Technologies, which work



High-rise fireplaces can be attractive inside and outside.

well with almost all of their Heatilator and Heat & Glo brand

natural-gas fireplaces. Everyone from architects to condo owners likes the pleasing exterior appearance of these caps. Their streamlined design has minimal impact on the building’s exterior appearance.

The caps come ready to install and work with eight-inch DVP cinch pipes. They are painted beige, which serves as a primer for field painting, and work with a wide range of construction materials, such as structured insulated panels and glass panels. The Hearth & Home

Technologies High-Rise Termination Caps are engineered to meet the strict requirements of high-rise projects, and have a watertight design that minimizes service calls and performs well in high-wind situations. The downward design and integrated gasketing ensure no water filtration. The caps employ stainless steel construction that is more durable than aluminized steel and will not corrode in coastal or urban conditions.

More information is available from Hearth & Home Technologies at (800) 669-4328.

The art of fire

A natural-gas flame that is a work of art? You bet! Builders and remodelers are getting clients' attention with new natural-gas fire treatments.

ThermArt™ is a "fire painting" that hangs on the wall while providing the benefits of a conventional direct-vent, natural-gas fireplace.

The outer frame of the fireplace is made of stainless steel or titanium, but it's the refractory plaque that gets all the attention. The plaque, handcrafted in Denmark and mounted behind clear or frosted ceramic glass, is available in six designs, from "Teardrop" to "Insight." A customer can purchase any or all of the plaque designs and interchange them, or even have a custom plaque

created, such as one with a company logo.

The ThermArt fire incorporates a full-function, remotely controlled gas valve that turns on at the push of a button. The remote control is also the room thermostat.

While a variety of sizes are available, the back of the self-contained

ThermArt unit

is only six inches deep (minimum) and can be inserted into any standard wall. Exterior wall mountings are vented behind the unit using a direct vent. Once installed, the ventilation runs straight up through the building.

The Cyclone™, an innovative offering from Heat & Glo, is best described as a spinning tower of fire. Yes, it's a fireplace but with a single

flame spiraling upward, dancing inside a sleek, glass cylinder. A fan at the bottom of the cylinder creates turbulent air, causing the flame to twist.

It's more than just a mesmerizing effect. With 15,000 BTUs, the Cyclone offers a comfortable level of heat for smaller areas, such as foyers and

hallways, or in public areas like a lobby, bar or showroom.

The Cyclone is available as a pre-assembled system for easy installation on a wall, with everything needed except for the vent pipe to the outside. The package includes the Cyclone, a decorative front in either Brushed Nickel/Black Nickel or Brushed Copper/Black Copper, a decorative

base material and an RC-Smart remote control.

Heat & Glo also offers a customizable version that allows



ThermArt can be placed on any wall.



The Cyclone adds interest and warmth.

architects, builders and remodelers to create a work of art for their own unique installation. The customizable version is encased in a free-standing glass cylinder, offering a 360-degree view of the fire.

For more information on these products, visit their web sites at www.thermart.com and www.heatnglo.com.

Natural gas in a high-rise? It's easy with vertical mains

Think you can't have natural gas in high rise construction? Think again.

"The assumption has always been it's too difficult to do natural gas because of the height of the building," says Windell Peters, manager of Codes and Standards at AGL Resources. "But with vertical mains, it can be done, and done competitively."

Simply put, an underground main goes to the building, then

turns vertically and runs up the full height of the building, serving each apartment or condo. The vertical main is owned and maintained by AGL Resources, just the same as underground mains.

Being able to offer natural gas makes a high-rise structure more attractive to residents and buyers. Natural gas is the undisputed choice in heating, providing a steady flow of warm air that heats

residences faster while using less energy. Offering natural-gas ranges, which operate at about 50 percent of the cost of an electric range, appeals to busy people and gourmet cooks alike.

"Also, with natural gas in your high rise, you can include the natural-gas tankless water heaters," Peters points out. "This not only saves energy costs, as tankless units provide hot water only on demand, but also gives the

architect more valuable floor space to use for living space."

How high can vertical mains go? "There's no limit," Peters says. "Customers ask for natural gas and now developers can provide it, even with multi-story condos and high-rise apartments."

Architects, engineers, developers and builders can contact their AGL Resources rep for more information on vertical mains.



The case for “smaller”

It’s a hot new trend: single-family homebuyers who don’t want room to roam but demand luxury.

BY JANE SCHREIER JONES

Houses have gotten bigger, no doubt about it. While the average American family has shrunk in the last 35 years from 3.6 to 2.7 people, square footage of homes has mushroomed, and phrases like “McMansion” have crept into conversations. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average size of a new home in 2005 was 48 percent larger than in 1975.

But as some builders review blueprints of houses with 5,000 square feet and more and scurry to add home theaters, wine rooms and bedroom-size entryways, savvy builders are noticing an emerging trend. There is a growing market for single-family homes that are smaller but offer better functionality and are loaded with amenities.

“This is absolutely what we’re seeing in our marketplace,” says Bobby Lunceford, president of Bob Lunceford Properties, Inc. of Acworth, Ga. Lunceford is building homes of 3,200 to 3,800 square feet in the \$500,000 price range. “People are looking for all the bells and whistles in smaller homes. They want bathrooms with ceramic tile, framed mirrors, cabinets

around the mirror, double showerheads, and so forth.”

Empty-nesters, professional couples and even small families are seeking out these smaller upscale homes. They don’t need room to roam but are demanding features and luxury appointments usually found in much larger homes.

Less-than-jumbo houses offer many advantages. They are easier to furnish and keep clean and less expensive to operate. Plus, because there is less living space, homeowners are selective about what they include in each room and often resist the urge to load up on “stuff.”

Many people are choosing the “less is more” path even though they can afford a much larger place, because they want to avoid the taxes, energy costs and upkeep that a mega-house requires – year after year.

“So we pay careful attention to energy efficiency when building these smaller, luxury homes,” says Ed Hatcher, president of Hatcher Homes in Smyrna, Ga., which primarily builds homes of 2,800 to 3,600 square feet. “Our homes offer natural-gas heat because people not only like its efficiency but also prefer the way natural-gas heat feels.”

Because air from a natural-gas furnace is up to 25 degrees warmer than air from an electric heat pump, and because today's natural-gas furnaces feature technology that saves money, many builders make natural-gas heat an integral part of their homes' offerings.

"We also use higher-efficiency water heaters, and even feature natural-gas tankless water heaters in some homes," Hatcher says. "When we hang a tankless water heater in the utility room, instead of the room being totally taken up by a water heater, you have room for tools and other items."

Load up the luxury

"There is definitely a market for smaller houses loaded with quality," says Hatcher. "We do a nice level of finish throughout our homes, from the level of trim to using higher-end finish materials. We include wide-plank hardwoods, tray ceilings and other upscale features."

Kitchens play a major role in convincing a homeowner that a smaller house can still be luxurious and great for entertaining. "People want upgraded cabinets, glass doors, under-cabinet lighting, and other features that used to be a luxury," Lunceford reports.

At the heart of an upscale kitchen is the natural-gas range, because cooks agree that natural gas cooks best. Patterned after

professional models, today's gas ranges offer even cooking, high-output burners, and super-low simmer temperatures. Other cook-friendly features include self-cleaning ovens and vented grills.

Talented builders are utilizing every inch of space in the kitchen and other rooms. "We look for spaces where we can do build-outs or incorporate niche functions, such as building in a rack for displaying a collection, creating a bookshelf under the staircase or a backpack nook inside the back door," Hatcher says.

"Lighting is extra important in a smaller house," he continues, "so we let natural sunlight flood in where possible. Plus, we include other upgraded lighting, such as mini-flood lights built into the hallway ceilings to highlight artwork. We also pre-wire for whole-house audio."

People with smaller homes often utilize their outdoor area more, even creating an outdoor room. "People often ask us to stub out the gas line for their gas grill," Hatcher says. "One of our buyers even put in a little dipping pool and had a gas water heater to keep the pool nice. Upscale living means having a nice environment, indoors and out."

"People want covered porches, patios, outdoor natural-gas kitchens to make up for smaller square footage inside," Lunceford agrees. "We put a stub

out for natural gas either under the deck or by the patio, because even if our customers don't build outdoor rooms, they still want their outdoor grills."

Design tips

Building a smaller home doesn't mean just fewer rooms, although eliminating a formal living room and other "showcase rooms" is an easy way to achieve less square footage. Here are other ways builders are cutting

square footage but still thrilling homeowners.

Create openness. "Instead of having a four- or five-foot opening into a room, we'll open that up to an eight- or 10-foot opening," Lunceford says. "Make walls disappear where possible, and use posts or columns to separate areas."

Think double-duty. A guest room can also serve as a home office.

Shrink the bedrooms. Forget the massive sanctuary bedrooms; a bedroom can be just for sleeping and dressing.

Offer built-ins. Built-in cabinets, bookcases, drawers under stairs, etc., take up less space than add-ons.

Raise the ceilings. "Even the 9-foot ceiling is dead and gone," Lunceford says. "On the main floor we use only 10-foot ceilings."

Use a natural-gas, direct-vent fireplace. Give the homeowner the ambiance of a fireplace while eliminating the need for a flue.

Use natural light. Sunlight enlarges a small space.

Move the staircase.

Staircases on the side of the home instead of the center create more floor space.

Widen the hallways. "Even with a smaller home, a wide hallway can give a feeling of space," says Hatcher.

Remember the grandkids! If you're building for empty nesters, a huge priority is having a place for kids and grandkids to stay. 🏠



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