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Custom Builders Come Together Around A Single Vision To Build A New Kind Of Community.

Heather McCune, Editor-in-Chief
July 1, 2005
Custom Builder



Absolutely not.

These builders are so confident in the value of unique architecture transferred from a home to a place, that they've staked their future together along with the vision of Rio Development. The two builders banded together to form a third entity, Street Scene Development, dedicated to creating sustainable living environments in the urban core of Tucson, Ariz.

Who better to create a special place to live than the people in the business of building homes that deliver on that definition every day? Working with clients to design their homes on their lots, custom builders guide the creation of memorable places.

The question becomes: how do you transfer that one-of-a-kind skill from a home to a community? Is it too much to expect that buyers can translate the value of building and buying a one-of-a-kind home to buying a home in a one-of-a-kind place? Ask custom builders Jim Gray of StellarGray Custom Homes and Tom Wuelpem and Jeff Scheffman of Rammed Earth Development this question and you'll get this answer:

Street Scene is one of five home builders put together by Rio Development for the the Mercado District of Menlo Park, which represents the living example of the shared vision of both builders and master developer Justin Dixon of Rio Development. A few details on this one-of-a-kind place:

- The design concept is fashioned in a traditional Mexican/European urban streetscape very much inspired and modeled by a small town in Central Mexico, San Miguel de Allende.
- The neighborhood, based on classic urban design principals, will be built around three common plazas. In total, the community features seven plazas and two walking streets.
- The entire project consists of approximately 100 single family homes, 14 bungalow units and 150 condominium and loft apartments. Home prices range from \$80,000 to \$300,000 for bungalow units, \$150,000 to \$500,000 for single family homes and condominiums and lofts range \$150,000 to \$750,000.
- The single family units built by Street Scene Development will be primarily two-story row houses with wrought iron balconies fronting many of the streets. The wall systems will be combination of thick masonry units, creating for a substantial product with a timeless feel.
- Lots throughout the development are deliberately small, ranging in widths from 16 to 36 feet. Garages will be accessed from back alleys and specific streets, known as paseos, will be open exclusively to bike and foot traffic. The community layout segments the larger single family lots for custom homes to the edge of the community, though these streets are still less than a five-minute walk from the main plaza. Building materials for the custom homes mimic the rest of the community — rammed earth, adobe, pressed earth block, concrete block, concrete/foam block and steel framing.
- Some homes will be designed to accommodate first floor retail and/or office space, with zoning allowing for this mixed use.
- Outdoor year space will be minimal for each home. However, each house incorporates one or more private outdoor spaces in the form of courtyards, either covered or open, that also serve as light well for the first floor rooms. Many of these courtyards will overlook plazas when the doors are open to street, yet closing the door provides the homeowners privacy as well.
- All housing in the community will be plumbed for solar hot water heating.



Paseo

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Part of a Larger Plan

The Mercado District mixed use development project is the first step in a much larger effort in Tucson — the multi-billion dollar Rio Nuevo Project. A comprehensive downtown revitalization project funded by the State of Arizona, City of Tucson and private enterprise, the goals for the 62-acre project are to create a vibrant experience in downtown Tucson and increase the number of housing units and types within the city. The Mercado District is the largest residential component of the Rio Nuevo master plan.



Artistic rendering of Mercado District

Rio Development Company, under the leadership of Justin Dixon is the master developer for Mercado District of Menlo Park. At a planning commission hearing on the status of the Rio Nuevo project, fate played its hand. Dixon, Wuelpem, Gray and Dante Archangeli of Milestone Homes, one of the other builders at Mercado District of Menlo Park, all lingered after the meeting, each engaged in separate conversations, but all around the same topic — creating the right residential component for this project. Each overhearing the others, they all finished their current conversations, anxious to begin a new one with each other.

"It sounds too simple, but that's exactly how we all met," explains Gray. "We each referenced the same small Mexico town as inspiration for what kind of community we could create, what kind of architecture to build and what materials would be appropriate in a desert urban area. I call that fate."

It's too simple to suggest that a single encounter created a business partners. The world of business is simply too complicated today for such an immediate outcome. However, Dixon, Gray and Wuelpem all say that they knew from that first day that they shared a vision that could — and did — translate into the winning proposal for the Mercado District.

"The power of like minds drew us together," says Wuelpem. "We shared the same passion and found a way to make the deal work for every pocketbook."

For StellarGray Homes and Rammed Earth Development, the choice was to work together on the project (as they have many times before) through their existing companies or to devise another option. Forming a new company as a limited liability corporation seemed the right decision both for the current project and for future opportunities as well. Both Gray and Wuelpem believe that their work at Mercado District — with Wuelpem primarily handling design and Gray overseeing construction — will open future opportunities for similar jobs.



Residential development

"Street Scene Development as a new company sets the stage for future work together," says Gray. "We combine the skills, and with this project, the experience to go after new kinds of work while each of our existing businesses continues in their niches."

Gathering The Herd

Completing a project like the Mercado District takes planning and partners. One of the earliest contributors to the project was Desert Archaeology, a company contracted by the City of Tucson to excavate the site. During excavation the Desert Archaeology team found the oldest pottery shards ever unearthed in the Southwest, evidence of an agricultural canal system and other significant artifacts dating back 4,000 years.

This history became new again in the hands Stefanos Polyzoides of Moule & Polyzoides Urbanists and Architects. In creating the layout for the residential streets he began with the contours of ancient canals and built on this structure with principles of Traditional Neighborhood Design. This approach to planning helped define the placement of the housing as well as its character.

To deliver on all of the various types of housing — from apartments to large single family homes — additional builders were recruited for the project. "It's important to bring in the right players for each portion of the project," explains Dixon. "What we looked for in each of the participants were people who share the same vision about the neighborhood and could deliver on helping us create a sustainable built environment."

All builders also had to agree to adhere to design standards and a pallet of materials. Likewise, to maximize the efficiency of the building process, individual builders had to be willing to commit to developing entire blocks and agree that the front elevation of each building on a block would be unique. However, within the design standards, each builder has been permitted to explore a variety of appropriate architectural styles, explains Dixon.

Milestone Homes fit that definition and relished the challenge presented by the project. Founded in 1991 by Archangeli and Eric Freedberg, the company specializes in building and designing custom homes and has expertise in unique architecture, sophisticated construction and energy efficiency. Seventeen homes will be built by Milestone in the Rio Nuevo development.

"We're building on the single family homes on the largest lots, 40 x 100," explains Archangeli, "and offer homes from 1200 sq. ft. to 3000 sq. ft."

Designing homes for an urban living requires each plan be flexible enough to meet the needs of all the various buyers. Milestone is developing two to three basic floor plans that Archangeli describes as "the entrees, and where we'll allow buyers to personalize the space is with what we can the side dishes — casitas, various solutions for accommodating the car and great flexibility within the actual footprint of each home."

Other builders recruited to bring the Mercado District to life include Paulo DeLorenzo of Innovative Homes and Barry Coleman.

A Neighborhood Plan

A neighborhood is more than a collection of houses and this is certainly evident in the plan for the Mercado District of Menlo Park. The master plan seamlessly integrates the urban environment with the natural surroundings of the site in the following ways:

- a five-minute walk from the center of the community to its edge;
- an interconnected network of multi-module thorough-fares;
- a rich set of thoroughfares that range from rambblas to paseos, as well as plazas and smaller plazuelas;
- a mix of residential, retail and office uses;
- immediate pedestrian access to nature;
- places for recreational activity in plazas and pocket parks;
- house type for people of a variety of incomes and ages;
- landscape in character with the climate and culture of Tucson, and
- sustainability measures that advance the long-term value and viability of the project.

"Mercado really represents what can happen when people with complementary skills share a common vision," says Jim Gray.