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## LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

March 17 - 23, 2003

\$3.00

March 17, 2003

REAL ESTATE

LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL 35

### Market Emerges for 'Paint-by-Numbers' Home Design



Structure: Work is underway on three predesigned houses in Brentwood.

By DANNY KING  
Staff Reporter

With L.A. County housing prices increasing by 31 percent over the last three years, one developer is finding new homebuyers willing to pay a little less for a little more.

Robert Kleiman and Mark Sapiro, partners in Structure Development, are touting what they call a "paint-by-numbers" approach to designing and building homes. The pair use the model home concept used in planned communities and apply it to single lots on the Westside and West Valley.

In picking housing components from the limited selections in a catalog, the economies offered by limiting choices help keep costs down and speed development.

"In order to sell a house in advance, you have to show them everything they're getting," said Kleiman, standing in front of a Carmelina Avenue site in Brentwood where Structure is building a 4,200-square-foot home on spec. "Everything that's unclear is a point of dispute."

Structure has used this method to build and sell about 50 homes throughout the past five years in Brentwood, Westwood, Sherman Oaks and Studio City. The two worked for Agoura Hills-based homebuilder Braemar Group for 13 and 11 years, respectively, before founding Structure in 1996.

Using a handful of exterior motifs geared toward specific neighborhoods — Cape Cod for Brentwood, French Norman for Westwood, Spanish Colonial for Miracle Mile — Structure's designs are geared to the flat, 50- to 65-foot wide lots that dominate the Westside. They range from 2,800 to 5,200 square feet.

Construction costs for a custom home can range from \$250 to \$400 per foot, depending on level of finishes. That values a 4,200 square foot home at between \$1 million and \$1.6 million, exclusive of land.

Structure has delivered the same size home, inclusive of land, for \$800,000 in Studio City and \$2.4 million in Brentwood in a market where skyrocketing property values have sent prices for a "tear-down" to close to \$1 million.

#### Replacement homes

Besides spec projects, the company has developed what Kleiman terms the "infill build-to-suit" business. That market caters to Westside and West Valley residents in 1,600- to 1,800-square-foot pre-war houses who want to stay in their neighborhoods but can't afford to buy new homes.

"A lot of people are getting into the market for the best price they can and they usually have to remodel or extensively realign the house," said Scott Gibson, president of Coldwell Banker Greater Los Angeles. "You can go out and spend a fortune on an architect and still not get a good house."

Murray Weisberg, associate manager at Coldwell Banker's Brentwood Court office, said not much was lost with the demolition of the older stock. "Most of the houses on the Westside need to be blown up or torn down anyway," he said. "You're buying the land value."

But replacing existing homes with larger ones that fill the lot has its critics.

Enough newer, larger homes have been built in Santa Monica's pricey north-of-Montana Avenue neighborhoods in recent years to mobilize the city to put a measure on the ballot this year to create a historic district forcing all proposed demolitions and exterior alterations to go before the city's Landmarks Commission. That action that has kept Structure from building any homes in that city.

"The irony is that the Westside has a peculiar charm of houses that are set back from the street, and it's compromised when a developer packs as much square footage as possible," said Mike Deasy, partner at Mossler, Deasy & Doe Realtors, a Beverly Hills brokerage specializ-

ing in architecturally significant homes. "Many of the houses seem to be built at three-quarter scale."

Kleiman estimated that about half of the dozen or so homes Structure will build this year will be build-to-suit homes that will range from \$500,000 to more than \$1 million.

"They know exactly what it will cost to the dime," said Kleiman, whose homes take between seven and nine months to build. "If 50 items on the house get changed, I'm okay — as long as it gets done before I start building."

As for the snob appeal of having an architecturally significant, custom-designed home, both Kleiman and Gibson dismissed the concept as an ideal for a select few who can afford the process.

"I don't think anyone at a cocktail party is going to ask you if you have a predesigned home," said Gibson.