

Buying a new home with eyes wide open



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On Real Estate

Boyce Thompson built 15 houses in 16 years. Some people might regard him as a glutton for punishment.

No, he's not a home-builder. But Thompson loves houses. His veritable marathon of home construction was part of his job duties during his stint as editorial director for *Builder* magazine, a well-regarded trade publication. He oversaw the construction of the so-called concept homes toured by thousands of people at builder shows and featured in the publication as bricks-and-mortar manifestations of the latest in architecture, construction techniques and materials.

During his tenure, he also crisscrossed the country touring builders' models and checking out new ideas in neighborhood design.

So he figures he's learned a thing or two about the process. He also figures that a significant number of consumers sat on the real estate sidelines during the recession, and that those would-be buyers might be surprised at what changed in homebuilding during the downturn. So he's written a book, "The New New Home" (Taunton Press), that's partly a road map to new construction for consumers, partly a memoir of his impressions of the thousands of new homes he's seen.

In an edited interview, he talked about the new

mindset he perceives in an industry famously resistant to change.

Q: What was your aim in writing "The New New Home"?

A: My premise was to write a book for consumers about what they could do to protect themselves from another decline in values. I basically started dispensing as much advice as I could think of. But then I thought it could be much more interesting if I brought in my show homes. I've drilled geothermal wells, I've put in photovoltaic systems, I've done value engineering (a structured analysis of the building process).

And I wanted to create a guide that could inform consumers about the surprising amount of innovation in homebuilding that occurred as builders struggled to stay afloat.

Q: Builders, as you note in the book, went out of business by the thousands during the downturn. How did they also manage to be innovative during that period?

A: During the recession, builders had to innovate to survive. They faced nearly insurmountable competitive challenges. There was no way they could compete, pricewise, with existing homes. And once the new-home communities began devaluing, builders may have found themselves competing with (resales of) homes in their own neighborhoods that they, themselves, had built two or three years earlier. So they had to burrow deep into the textbooks and find things that would give

them a competitive edge.

Q: In what ways?

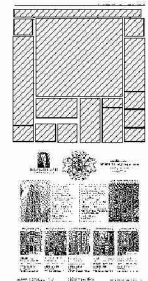
A: The homes they began to build became more space-efficient, greener and more technologically advanced. In the book, I cite examples of ways that their homes got smaller, in terms of square footage, but these houses do a lot more with less. A lot of builders have literally tossed aside the rooms that families really don't use, like living rooms and formal dining rooms, and devoted the square footage to everyday spaces.

Many of the best builders in the country began to build high-performance homes. They went through engineering analysis of design and construction and they reduced waste, both in construction materials and in energy use. It has caught on widely.

Q: What should consumers be most careful about in today's housing environment?

A: One message I tried to impart is that you need to think of the future and what it might mean to your family. You need to think about the possibility that multiple generations might need to live there as grandparents age. And that there might be a need for what's known as universal design, making houses safe and easy to get around in for people whose mobility might be limited.

Which doesn't mean you have to have that designated extra bedroom for a need you might have someday. Think about "flex" spaces. Maybe the space isn't being used as a master bedroom right now, but it's a room that's adjacent to a bath. And that bath might



not be a full bathroom right now, but it's got room for a shower and you could easily convert it to a master setup if you needed it.

The overall message in the book is that you need to be really careful, you have to be a savvy consumer in today's market. I think you

increase your odds of making a sound investment if you insist that the house is as energy-efficient and as green as possible. The other big thing is the floor plan — I don't think you need bloated space in a house today. It's not like the days when houses were appreci-

ating 20 percent a year and the bigger the house, the more money you were making. Don't buy more house than you need.

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BOYCE THOMPSON PHOTO

New energy-efficient houses, such as these Nexus EnergyHomes in Frederick, Md., make a good investment.



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— Boyce Thompson, author of “*The New New Home*”