

Habitat Studio & Workshop Ltd.

Taking Custom Homes to a New Level

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When one thinks of custom home building, a vision of an architect with blue prints and templates is often the vision. Habitat Studio & Workshop Ltd., however, aims to make each client's "habitat" a design of his or her own in its "studio." So, for those home buyers who want to have the ability to customize every minute detail of their home, from the staircase to the fireplace, Habitat Studio is waiting for your call.

Founded in 1992 by Bruce Watt, Vince Campbell and Peter Amerongen, known in the company as the "three amigos," Habitat Studio's success is a result of the "synergy" that was created when these three industry leaders got together and combined ideas. Headquartered in Edmonton, Habitat Studio works throughout the area, and serves the residential market with new homes, renovations, and some of the most cutting-edge green technology and projects in the industry.

The Company Fingerprint

To date, the company has designed, built or renovated approximately 400 homes across Canada. With its 40 employees, Habitat Studio has annual revenue of \$10 million and operates as an independent company. Due to the company's niche in custom home building, there is no one management scheme that covers all the necessary bases. As a result, Habitat Studio has its own in-house system that works on a smaller scale and caters to its unique needs.

Designed to be an employee-owned business, Habitat Studio is still adhering to this objective and, in addition to its founders, has 11 employees who are shareholders in the company. Habitat Studio's reputation precedes itself and the company has "a line of people wanting to work for us," says Vice President Trevor Hoover.

It is thanks to the company's standing as a good place to work that it relies almost solely on referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations when looking for new employees. Another testament to the company culture: all of its managers have worked their way through its ranks to get to the positions they are in. "We have a lot of people who have been here for 10 years," says Hoover.

To bring in fresh, young minds, the company does have a program with local trade schools and pushes those with the

most potential to become apprentices. Quite impressively, many of these potential new employees enter the North Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and graduate at the top of their class because "they already learned everything [at Habitat]," says Hoover.

Habitat Studio employees stay because "we treat them well and keep them interested; because we do custom homes, no one project they do is alike," explains Hoover.

Partnering with subcontractors for a majority of its trades, these decisions are all that much more important and the company looks to quality of work and reputation when choosing who to work with.

Projects that Speak for Themselves

The company Web site perhaps states its objective best: "We design a one-of-a-kind home that wraps itself around you, giving you smart space in a seamless flow for comfortable living. With your help, we add style - inside and out - to represent your personality and enhance your identity."

Promising this level of customization on each project, Habitat Studio has a process that guarantees this is reached for its clients.

Habitat Studio serves its clients as "professional advisers" who manage the process with transparency. This gives customers complete control over their budget. The company first acts as a representative of its client's interests to the contractors and suppliers who are completing the work. A line-by-line budget is also crafted to estimate costs for each item included on the house. Throughout the construction process, as things are apt to change, Habitat Studio also tracks expenditures so clients are informed of any changes.

The company uses AutoCAD and Google Sketchup software to allow customers to preview their homes. "We set them up in the board room with a projector and walk them through their house," says Hoover.

Given the nature of Habitat Studio's work, all projects are unique. "We do both new and renovations and both are very custom, so they are always interesting; the design that goes into a house is just a lot of fun," exudes Hoover.

Dedicated to the vision of working for each client's unique dream home, Habitat Studio does not complete just one type of home. Indeed, the company can complete some of the most cutting-edge green homes or more simple and affordable custom homes.

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Leading the way in environmentally friendly practices is something Habitat Studio can claim. The company completes net zero homes, which are so called because within 12 months they will produce as much of (if not more than) the amount of energy as is needed to power the home. Completely self-sustaining, these homes have solar and thermal panels on the roof to produce energy.

In the summer, there is more than enough power generated by this technology and what is excess is put back on the power grid (and even credited at a favorable rate in certain territories). During the winter months, when the sun shines for much less time, the energy grid is drawn upon in the traditional manner and at the going rate to power the home. Habitat Studio also employs the use of many green practices, from low-voltage lighting to much more complex technologies, in order to make projects as easy on the environment as possible. With this technology, the company is leading not just Alberta, but Western Canada fearlessly into the green movement.

For these net zero homes, Habitat Studio was honored at an award ceremony with the Net Zero Energy Home Coalition for being the closest net zero energy custom home builder of the year. "We won because we have been able to meet net zero," says Hoover, simply.

Of course, Habitat Studio does non-net zero projects that are equally worthy of acclaim. One of the company's recent projects was an impressive Georgian-style home spanning 15,000 square feet and constructed with "brick, white columns, and lots of marble," explains Hoover.

Moving Along with Ease

With plans to continue growth of about 10 percent each year, Habitat Studio hopes to increase its involvement in the energy upgrade sector. "This involved going into older homes, replacing windows, adding insulation, a new furnace, etc.," explains Hoover. With the government giving grants to homeowners who can prove improvement in its insulation quality, this is an assured area of growth.

Whether a custom home-seeker is in search of a self-sustaining home or simply wants to have the ability to design his or her dream home, Habitat Studio is ready and able to complete it all. ■



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