

Residential design firm reports continuing recovery of housing market

Along with other parts of the country, central Minnesota is seeing a growing recovery of the housing market. While remaining cautious, Minnesota residents are once again consulting with architects for design changes to existing homes and new construction.

Paul Ringdahl of Ringdahl Architects of Alexandria says that business is picking up. Architects gauge by the number of new clients how the building industry is doing and a growing backlog of projects is a good indicator. “The current backlog is at four months,” he said, noting that the American Institute of Architects (AIA) reported a backlog down to three months at the low point of the economic downturn. It may be a slow climb back to “normal” levels but overall, it’s a good sign.

The National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo Housing Market Index for newly built single-family homes rose for the fifth consecutive month in September, reaching its highest level since June of 2006. While it still has a long way to go on the road to recovery, builder confidence and optimism is improving.

Energy efficiency and accessibility, both reflecting home owners’ desires to keep long-term costs down while remaining in their homes as they age, remain priorities in home design and remodeling projects. Richard Hardine, a construction manager with Infinity Development who works with Ringdahl, says the accessibility issue is a big one for their clients. “Ninety percent of our clients build for accessibility and 60% remodel for the same reason.” The former trend for multiple levels and the need for stairs has dropped off. “People are leaning toward one-level living with quality and efficiency equally important.” The size of homes has also decreased with potential clients moving toward homes under 2,500 square feet.

Energy efficiency and use of green materials are common requests along with low maintenance. Ringdahl sees requests for more synthetic and engineered materials for the exterior of homes and natural wood and traditional systems for interiors. Many home owners dream of energy management systems though Ringdahl says that follow-thru is low. He gets requests for backup power generation systems and in response to ownership of hybrid cars, electrical docking stations.

Ringdahl and Hardine have seen a decline in requests for media rooms, exercise and fitness areas and greenhouses. They’ve noticed an uptick in home offices with more people embracing working from home. Mudrooms and drop zones, those convenient areas that control clutter and ease house cleaning duties, are on the upswing. A desire to spend more time outdoors may be responsible for the waning of exercise rooms and simultaneously for the more frequent design of outdoor rooms.

The building trends seen by Ringdahl Architects are consistent with reported market conditions in the Midwest. AIA’s Home Design Trends Survey documented an improvement in market

conditions for first-time buyer/affordable, move-up, and custom and luxury home sectors. While these scores remain low, they do indicate a rebound.

“Residential firms saw healthy gains, providing further evidence that the residential construction sector is in recovery,” said AIA Chief Economist Kermit Baker. He also noted that the ability to secure financing is a serious problem inhibiting some clients from moving forward with building projects.