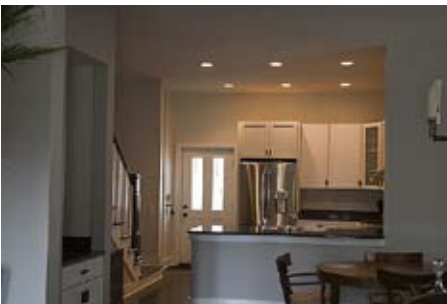




simply livable



Photos by David Brumgard

“Urban living isn’t for everyone,” admits Gavin Thomas. But it sure has worked out for his family.

The Thomases recently moved into their new custom in-fill home on the Southside. Among their neighborhood’s mix of newly renovated and historic houses, the Thomases’ home blends Victorian-craftsman architecture with a modern interior design. From the outside, you would never guess at the home’s 2,600 square feet. While it is unassuming and unpretentious, it achieves grandeur of comfort and space. And the Thomases have outfitted the home with modern furnishings and appliances nicely suited to its modern layout—large open rooms, tall windows that issue plenty of natural light, and classic wood floors opposite high ceilings. “We wanted fresh. We didn’t want the typical. Just fresh,” explains Christine.

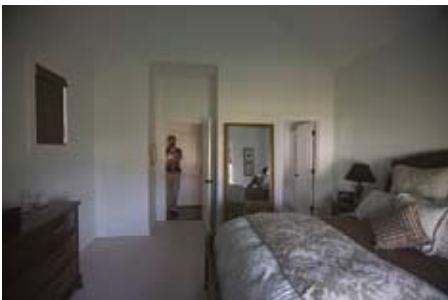
The home proves their notion that higher quality beats excessiveness and that contemporary and classic style needn’t conflict. You can have it both ways, and that is how Collier and the Thomases approached the construction process.

“I would rather have a smaller house of higher quality than just a bunch of space,” explains Gavin whose perception of value is based on quality craftsmanship rather than size. And it shows: every inch of their new home is livable but not crowded. Even the walls are left uncluttered. Light switches are positioned at hand level, not eye level; electrical outlets are built into the baseboards, not the walls.

In fact, the Thomases made numerous adjustments to the original plans. Like taking off a portion of the wrap-around front porch and adding to the living area. Like utilizing the planned attic space to include a guest suite. Like installing an inside window that allows natural light to flow from one room to the next. The Thomases describe their home as functional, clean, and “just livable.”

The Thomases invested in a well-built house, and in return they got a great home that accommodates the family’s lifestyle. The openness of the home promotes entertaining. The kitchen, dining room and living area remain uninterrupted by walls, and because these areas flow

smart.



Photos by David Brumgard

into one another, the Thomases can comfortably host larger groups of people. The kitchen's plentiful countertops and stainless steel appliances underscore Christine's love for cooking, and the large antique dining room table is a family heirloom that they now have the space to enjoy.

Among the many reasons for building on the Southside, the amenities accompanying downtown living certainly appealed to the Thomases. Having lived in New York, Gavin gravitated toward the Southside when he and Christine began discussing the location of their next home. Gavin works only four blocks away, and there is dining and shopping all within walking distance. The Thomases hardly have an excuse to leave their neighborhood. And that is exactly why they love the location. "There is a great neighborhood feel here. Everyone has a porch and everyone uses it," explains Christine.

Though the home is situated only a few blocks off of Main Street, it has a quiet and calming atmosphere. The home was built to EarthCraft standards, requiring a completely sealed building envelope. The ultra therm air infiltration package and super efficient windows contribute to the quietness of the home, explains Bryan Youngblood, project superintendent for Collier Construction. And it may also explain why their electric bill is the same as it was in their last home even though they now have double the square footage.

Beyond the home's quietness and low electric bill, it was built with a whole-systems approach. The advanced framing used less lumber and left more room for insulation, and the insulated crawl space will help moderate the home's temperature. "I barely adjust the air from day to night because the house works so efficiently," explains Christine. And though they are not self-proclaiming environmentalists, they are happy the home was built with the environment in mind. "It was unique that I got to see everything behind the walls," explained Gavin who was present for much of the construction and witnessed Collier's crew take spray foam to every little crack.

But it wasn't green that sold the Thomases on Collier. "We wanted to question the norm, and Collier was on the same wavelength," explains Gavin. "That was definitely an appeal. They were open to our suggestions." Not only was Collier doing in-fill new housing when the Thomases were shopping the plan around, Collier was a company Gavin was comfortable entrusting the plans to. With a baby on the way, the Thomases simply needed a contractor who would share their vision for a home. And when it came down to it, the Thomases wanted to know that they were getting fresh, quality and livability.

smart.

just ask!

Ethan Collier

The Consumer Federation of America, in partnership with a number of other like-organizations, periodically surveys state and local consumer agencies to get a better idea of the problems facing American consumers. They have published the 2007 Consumer Complaint Report that, with real life examples, lists and details trends in consumer complaints.

It is disheartening that home improvement/construction is listed as #2 on the Top Ten Complaints, #1 on the Top Five Fastest-Growing Complaints and #1 on the Top Five Worst Complaints. The reason? Shoddy work and failure to start or complete the job.

As it turns out, people all over America are hiring fraudulent builders, and consumers are not doing the research. In many cases, it is just a matter of fraud, but all too often, consumers hire contractors with no credentials, no accolades, no peer or customer references or no experience.

And sometimes it's just not enough to ask for a license. Because the industry is only loosely regulated, it is too easy for even licensed contractors to cut corners.

Here are some helpful solutions:

Many homeowners take the lowest bid, and rightfully so. But sometimes you must ask the hard questions about time, labor, material, subcontractors and transportation. The lowest bid is often the result of little or no estimating. For this reason, the lowest bid can be deceiving, and sometimes it's wise to go with a different number from a contractor you know you can trust. It is always smart to make sure the builder has estimated the job carefully.

Good construction companies are transparent—they are out in the open and in the public eye. So do the research. Get on the internet and google the contractor's name. Find news articles, testimonials, awards and references. If the construction company does not have a presence in the community, it makes the company hard to trust.

While vision and values are much harder to gauge than credentials, it is important that your vision for your home aligns with the contractor's vision for your home. If the construction company has promotional material, look for the company's mission statement or philosophy. This should, at least initially, indicate how well the contractor shares your values.

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Too many contractors prey on uninformed homeowners. Perhaps it is time that construction companies begin educating their customers. When the consumer knows the difference between good and bad construction, it is much more difficult for the contractor to get away with shoddy work. If the contractor does not help you understand the process, then you may want to reconsider.

Never be afraid to ask questions! Many people do not know what kind of questions to ask contractors, or whether it is even okay to ask certain questions.

Here are questions that you should always ask:

- 1.** Ask if the company employs its own carpenters.
- 2.** Ask the contractor to provide proof of workers compensation and general liability. (It is illegal to have over 6 workers without workers comp. Otherwise, any financial burden for accidents is assumed by the homeowner.)
- 3.** Ask the contractor to provide references from both homeowners and industry peers (i.e. architects, designers, developers).
- 4.** Ask the contractor if you can walk-through projects under construction as well as finished projects?
- 5.** Ask the contractor for a list of the top 5 subcontractors used for the project? (It is smart to then require those subs be used for the project.)
- 6.** Ask the contractor to provide an estimate with at least 60% of the work estimated by the appropriate subcontractors? (You should make sure that the prices are estimated by actual subcontractors! Too often, jobs are not estimated by the subcontractors who will be responsible for providing materials and services.)

The answer to these questions should always be "yes." Truth be told, you should not have to do any of this. You should be able to make a simple choice quickly, but until laws are passed and regulations are enforced, consumers can at least help improve the quality of construction by demanding honesty and ethical practices.



Photo by David Brumgard