



# A river runs past them

## ONCE-INACCESSIBLE LANDS INSPIRE BUILDERS' DESIGN PLANNING

By Rebecca Field Jager

**WHEN A LOCAL BUILDER** approached designer Bryan Bruce to help create a line of heritage homes, the 44-year-old partner at Orchard Design, an architectural and marketing firm, jumped at the chance. Although the Cambridge-based company works with more than 30 builders, it's not every day it is asked to tackle a project so unusual.

Homebuyers may say they're after originality, but their claims don't always translate into sales. It is the builder's burden to try to distinguish itself from the pack while still fulfilling the wish list of today's market.

"Builders want to be different," says Bruce. "But when they do so there's a risk that it will be more difficult to sell the property."

James DeJonge, 49, the owner of Adelaide Custom Homes, was willing to take such a risk. Until recent years, land near the Grand River in Kitchener and Waterloo has been inaccessible, but thanks to explosive growth, river lots are now included in many "growth areas" determined by the cities.

DeJonge bought land near the Grand, down the road from Kitchener's historic Pioneer Tower and across from the recently restored 1830 homestead of Mennonite pioneer Samuel Betzner.

The prized land came with a challenge. Not only would he have to create homes to



Bryan Bruce of Cambridge designed houses blending modern and traditional elements to meet the heritage-look requirements for Adelaide Custom Homes' lots near the Pioneer Tower.

keep homebuyers happy, he had to satisfy city bureaucrats as well. He had, after all, purchased five designated heritage lots on which only city-approved, century-style homes could be built.

The dream of wrapping modernity in history overcame the nightmare prospect of wrapping his future in red tape. "I like a challenge," DeJonge says matter-of-factly. "I consider myself a visionary and I knew what I wanted to do. I could see it."

To make sure homebuyers could see it, too, DeJonge built two model homes, valued at \$760,000 and up, once his plans got the nod. One is a 3,273 square-foot two-storey stone house fashioned after a Mennonite farmhouse. The other, a 2,879



### PAYING HOMAGE TO TRADITION

James DeJonge, owner of Adelaide Custom Homes, is backed by the Pioneer Tower near his properties in south-end Kitchener.

Photography • David Bebee

square-foot storey-and-a-half brick home, mirrors a traditional farmhouse, but, with its sloped ceilings and smaller second floor, it incorporates a Scottish influence as well.

If the exteriors were designed to satisfy city hall, the interiors were designed with today's homebuyers in mind. Open the front door of either home and you're met with the timeless centre hall plan featuring a formal room on each side. A

two-piece powder room is close by, which you wouldn't find in an original farmhouse. Move toward the back of the houses and you move forward in time. Gone are the little rooms and boxy layouts of days of old; in their place, large kitchens and wide-open space.

"People want open-concept living," Bruce says. "They want a big kitchen overlooking the family room, a comfortable area in which all the day-to-day family activities

take place. These homes provide the solid look, the commanding presence and instant history of a heritage home, but with all the new concepts. Buyers get the best of both worlds."

DeJonge believes his success as a builder is tied to his attention to the little things.

"Today, people are all about the details," he says. "Sound systems, security and lighting systems, the details of the en suite. They want all the smaller goodies, a home

loaded with bells and whistles such as a basement with a theatre and wet-bar for entertaining, or a gym off the master bedroom. And Her Space. Little things like a makeup counter a woman can sit at, a laundry room she actually wants to be in, and spacious closets."

Dave Mandel, 47, a builder, developer and the owner of Laurel View Homes, agrees that features and amenities are important, but he believes it's not so much



## A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Dave Mandel (left), president of Laurel View Homes, and Josh Leiderman, vice-president of operations, visit Edgewater Estates in Kitchener.

Photography • Lisa Malleck

the house that people buy into, it's the community. Among his recent projects is Edgewater Estates, a sprawling subdivision along the Grand about a snowball's throw from Chicopee Ski Club.

"When people first come to see us, they drive through the community to get a sense of it. They decide, yes, I want to live here, and then they decide on the house."

During a cruise around the neighbourhood, Mandel says today's buyers look for a mixture of architecture, but an overall feeling of cohesiveness. They want parks, open spaces and accessibility to good schools and amenities.

"When we develop a subdivision, we dedicate five per cent of its acreage to parks and parkettes, smaller spaces with benches. People want walking trails that run through the community and join with other communities if possible."

Unlike many developers, Mandel doesn't plan a subdivision with a particular age group in mind.

"I've never understood why you would gear a community to a certain age group. I don't think an older buyer, say, wants to live in a subdivision with only old people; otherwise he'd move to an old folks' home. I think he'd rather live with other thriving, active adults and families. I think people like to see some kids."

His Edgewater Estates presents a mixture of styles and floor plans ranging from a 1,550-square-foot bungalow on a 50-foot lot for \$377,990 to a 4,427-square-foot, four-bedroom two-storey on a 62-foot lot backing on to the Grand River, listed at \$631,990.

To get a leg up on the competition, Mandel offers yet another high-demand convenience: design flexibility.

"We're a production builder, but we'll customize the home in any way a customer wants. We never say no. It may cost them, but we'll design something until we get it exactly how they want it."

A common request is to super-size an existing design. The average Laurel View sale is a house with 3,500 to 4,500 square feet.

"Because of the region's strong economic growth, especially in the insurance and high-tech sectors, it has become a white-collar, high-income community," Mandel says. "Generally, people who can afford it want big homes."

Gorana Krstic, 41, who works in the insurance industry, and her husband, Milan, 44, an entrepreneur with a trucking business, bought a 3,000-square-foot, four-bedroom two-storey home in Edgewater Estates in June 2007.

Their previous home in Waterloo was also a Laurel View house and they trusted the builder, but she supports Mandel's claim that people buy primarily into communities. She and her family love living in a quiet natural setting that is close to highways, malls and other amenities.

"When you have coffee on your porch, it feels like you're far, far away, but you're so close to everything."

Practically next door to Edgewater Estates, nestled in a wooded area about 100 yards from the Grand River, is Villas of Grand Chicopee, a condominium development by Cook Homes.

Owner Ian Cook, 47, says he's carving out a niche by giving customers what they don't want — or don't realize they want.

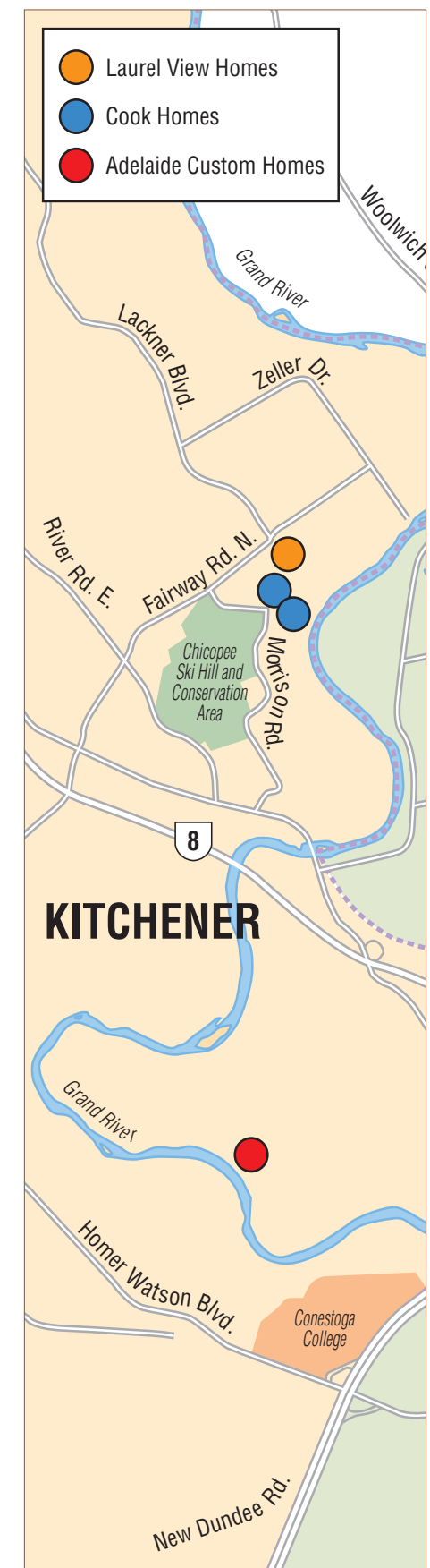
"Unlike areas such as London which has a mature empty-nester condo market, in our region we're at the not 'infancy,' but 'young child' phase of condo acceptance," he says. "To satisfy a gap in the market, Cook Homes is shifting its focus from standard freehold homes and semis to condominiums."

Among the challenges of steering a market toward condo living is putting sex appeal into the lifestyle to make up for the poorly perceived condo fees. Cook appeals to people looking for a spacious luxury home in a beautifully landscaped, yet maintenance-free enclave.

"For people who like to travel or own vacation homes, here you can simply shut the door and leave."

Villas range from 1,710 to 2,010 square feet (priced from \$309,900 to \$449,900) ▶

## RIVERSIDE DEVELOPMENTS



Map • Carolyn McLeod-McCarthy



## RETAILING LUXURY CONDOS


Ian Cook is shown at his Cook Homes condominium development known as the Villas of Grand Chicopee. He has a similar project underway in Waterloo.

Photography • Rainer Leipscher

► and feature nine-foot ceilings with taller casement windows on the main floor, and second-floor balconies.

Cook's other condo development, The Grand Bluffs at Eastbridge, is situated in Waterloo near RIM Park and Grey Silo Golf Course. Homes range from 1,700 to 2,125 square feet (priced from \$289,900 to \$534,900) and feature open-concept interiors geared to contemporary living. Think gourmet kitchens and breakfast nooks, bathrooms soaked in luxury, and ceramics, stainless steel and granite galore.

Although Cook says he considers location to be the most significant factor setting his company apart, he believes that builders in general have to change their way of thinking to thrive in today's market.

"A lot of builders think of themselves as constructors, but we're retailers who happen to sell houses," he says. "The retail business' No. 1 goal is to meet the expectations of customers and that's what you have to do to be competitive." 



Cook Homes builds high-end condos for the mature market, featuring open-concept interiors and designer details such as a double-sided fireplace (top). Photos • Rainer Leipscher

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