

## Calm amidst the construction storm



### Buddhist approach shows high-end home construction needn't be a three-year headache

Construction Manager Bart Mendel of Stonemark Construction Management, Los Angeles brings an extra dimension to his practice: the art of Zen. As a practising Buddhist, he believes that his holistic, harmonious approach has considerably improved the construction process of the glorious 5,000 to 20,000+ sq ft Mediterranean estates and contemporary homes that he has managed over the years, in terms of time, cost and - perhaps most incredibly - stress-levels.

It's a familiar story: the architect and contractor estimate the home will be built and ready in a year and a half, and three years later the crew is still on the job. The homeowner is renting a home or hotel in the neighbourhood - and the overtime costs for their 'dream' house have gone through the roof, turning it into anything but a dream.

But according to Mendel, this doesn't have to be the case: "When we manage a project, not only do we reduce construction time, but by the time the home is finished the costs of the total project - including our management fees - are usually less than if we had never been on board. We have a track record of saving 5% to 10% or more on overall project costs."

Do architects and contractors resist being managed? Some may be wary at first. At the end of the day, when the job is on time, or better still, under budget, and the owners are singing everyone's praises, it turns out to be not such a bad idea.



Construction managers, otherwise known as owner's representatives, primarily manage estates and high-end custom homes and remodels. Today, owners' reps are more in vogue than ever, especially among those who cannot afford any missteps on what, in many cases, may be the most important building project of their lives - the family estate. These clients are building a legacy for their family, and their family's families, so runaway costs and stretched out timelines are simply unacceptable.

According to Marc Appleton, owner of the prestigious Appleton Architects, 'construction managers can be a mixed blessing - a help or a hindrance. We've experienced both.

Alternatively, and more positively, a good CM can assist in facilitating communication among the players and encourage a fair and reasonable process, even when pressured by their clients to be biased.'

According to Dan Andrews, President of Horizon General Contractors, 'having built high-end custom homes on the West side of Los Angeles for 30 years, I worked with a construction manager which made me reflect on what a quality manager could actually do. My experience was with a CM whose primary agenda was to attack the contractor's budget to prove to the owner that money savings were the most important part of construction. I think a construction manager who sees the process not as a pyramid, but as a circle, with all parties moving together, could be a great help. Many owners travel extensively and do not understand the homebuilding process. Having an



independent owner's rep who has the best interest of the project and players in mind can keep the emotional factors at bay, and only make the project a more positive experience for all.



Mendel adds: "Some of the larger general contracting firms consider staying clear of CMs, as they feel their own companies are well equipped to mediate and solve most issues, but nothing replaces the objectivity that comes from a manager who can view the entire project from a clear, unbiased perspective. Stonemark is unusual in the CM market, as we have qualified professionals on staff including a licensed engineer and architect who genuinely understand every step of the building process, from the hands-on work to the entire budgeting procedure. I have never found an instance where the costs and quality of materials could not be better controlled. And doing so, without any sacrifice to the original vision and functionality of the residence, is a true art form."

According to Mendel, 'estates are complicated, multi-layered projects, and managing them successfully requires a combination of science and art skills, precision, knowledge, harmony and patience.'

Patience is a quality Mendel knows something about. A practicing Buddhist for over 35 years, Mendel brings his Zen approach to every job, and manages to stay centred, sometimes in the midst of challenging chaos. "Is being Buddhist a prerequisite for this profession? Well, probably not - but I have to admit, after 35 years of successful projects and clients that keep coming back, it certainly hasn't hurt."