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The Architect Will See You Now

No longer booked up, designers tackle small renovations; the Samborns ponder their dream house

By SARA LIN

It's a good time to be in the market for an architect.

The housing slump has freed up residential architects who wouldn't even return phone calls during the boom. Many say they are hungry for business, seeking projects ranging from designing houses from scratch to taking on small renovations they would have turned down a year or two ago.

The newfound availability of architects -- combined with lower construction costs -- means some consumers can finally build the house they've long dreamed of.

Kevin and Rachelle Samborn have wanted to tear down their 1,800-square-foot ranch house in Swampscott, Mass., since they bought the property outside Boston in 1997. Mr. Samborn, a 39-year-old software executive, says the couple wants to replace the 1955 structure with a 2,600-square-foot, timber-frame house. They made a few calls four years ago for price estimates but held off because it was too expensive.

SHRINKING BACKLOGS



Darren McCollester/Getty Images

Since then, the costs of labor, materials and mortgages have tumbled as the housing market cratered. When contractors' estimates fell to \$225 a square foot last spring from \$300 four years ago, the Samborns decided to move forward. This time around the architects they contacted had a much more aggressive attitude toward winning their business, Mr. Samborn says. The couple hired Boston architect Jeremiah Eck to design their house, and the couple is considering a \$750,000 construction bid from a contractor. Mr. Samborn estimates the house will cost 25% less overall than a few years ago, including savings on architectural fees since Mr. Eck, like many architects, charged a percentage of the construction cost. Four years ago, Mr. Samborn says, "I wouldn't have gotten as much

Rachelle and Kevin Samborn say their four-year wait to build a house (rendering below) cut the cost about 25% including lower architectural fees.

house as I wanted."

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Eck MacNeely Architects

report shrinking job backlogs, according to the American Institute of Architecture Firms surveyed by the trade group during the 2007 third quarter -- compared with 31% during the same period two years ago; the Commerce Department said last week that job openings were at a 6-year low.

Viewed only modestly over the past year, many home improvements these days are likely to be the kind that don't require an architect, such as roof replacements or new windows, says Kermit Baker, the AIA's chief economist. "A lot of projects are happening, but they're not the upper-end renovations we saw three to four years ago," he says. There are fewer \$150,000 renovations and more \$40,000 jobs, and "at that price point, there's less architect involvement," Mr. Baker adds. A quarter of U.S. homes built each year involve significant work by an architect -- in many cases to modify a stock home plan -- but only about 5% of U.S. homes are designed from scratch by an architect, he says.

SMALLER JOBS

Yet some people find they can hire an architect even for tiny jobs. After retiling a bathroom, Gloria Lee of Sunnyvale, Calif., needed help to figure out how to decorate the walls with a few leftover marble tiles. The 49-year-old engineer thought about hiring an interior designer, but by chance she was able to snag the services of architect Louis B. Smith Jr., an acquaintance who had just been let go from his job designing condos in Detroit. Ms. Lee emailed him a sketch of the bathroom and a description of the tile. His solution: set the tiles back from the shower and neighboring walls, install mirrors and paint the gaps to match the marble's veins, making the spacing appear intentional. "We talked a few times over the phone, she sent me a check and I gladly cashed it," says Mr. Smith.

Architect Douglas Ruther in Brookline, Mass., feels fortunate that he's not had to go a day without work. But that doesn't mean the 43-year-old sole practitioner isn't worried. Mr. Ruther has a lead on a new-home project that could keep him busy, "but if they don't call, I'm not sure what I'll be doing in a month," he says.

In Denver, Gary Godden of Godden/Sudik Architects has watched the backlog at his 16-person firm shrink from one year to six months over the past year. His firm's revenue in 2007 fell 15% compared with a year earlier, he says. Calls about new projects usually pour in after the New Year, but so far this month he's had only a handful of calls. As for 2008, says Mr. Godden, "We'll just be happy to survive it." His firm doesn't plan to lower its fees to drum up business but he's considering cheaper jobs, including room additions. "There was a time when we were so busy that we wouldn't deal with those," Mr. Godden says. But "we're not as picky about projects anymore."

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