



ARMSTRONG HOMES

Building Technique Gains Acceptance

TEXT BY ALISON PRIDE PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE MELTZER

John Armstrong of Armstrong Homes in Bremerton describes his uncle Richard as something of a visionary. The founder in 1952 of Armstrong Homes, Richard Armstrong set out to bring accessibility and affordability to home building and adopted the slogan "There's no substitute for quality."

In 1959, he became one of the first builders in the country to develop a process later known as panelized construction for home building. In this process, all of the exterior and interior partitions for a house are assembled on site at the 10-acre panel plant in Auburn, which also serves as the location of the company office. They are then delivered to the prepped job site.

What happens next appears to neighbors a bit like a construction sleight

of hand. One day, the empty lot down the street holds nothing but a cement foundation. By the end of the next day, it sports a completely framed house. Such is the power of panelized construction to surprise and amaze.

John Armstrong, who works full time out of the company's Bremerton office, carries forward his uncle's legacy with a second-generation twist: custom home building. The panelized construction process, it turns out, is perfectly adaptable to building custom homes.

The simpler and more standardized plans his uncle originally used worked, Armstrong says, but the changing marketplace and increasing sophistication of homebuyers propelled the next generation forward. That generation includes not only John



Armstrong but his uncle's three children, who all work out of the office in Auburn.

"We wanted to take the panelization concept and customize it, and totally prove that it could be done. It's really been an exciting, challenging, fun thing for us," he says. "Clients today are very educated. They come to us because we are a panelized builder, because that's what they want. It's a technique that does nothing but be an advantage to the customer and the builder."

In addition to building custom homes using the panels, Armstrong Homes sells the panels to other builders and ships packages all over the world, including to such far-flung locales as Japan and Russia.

There are notable advantages to panelized construction for the home builder, according to Armstrong. For one thing, because all panels are cut using a computer-controlled jig system, the angles are exact, making for a more precise house and an overall sounder structure. "They can't be anything but





John Armstrong, owner of Armstrong Custom Homes opening kitchen pantry storage.

perfect when you're using a jig system," Armstrong says. "Once the angles are set, it's perfect. It's high-tech stick framing, is what it is." For another, because the panels are constructed in the factory, they are continually in a climate-controlled environment, reducing the effects of weather and temperature fluctuations on the wood.

But what turns heads is what happens when the panels are completed, color-coded and packed for shipping. Loaded onto a flatbed truck, they are delivered to the job site, where a giant crane lifts and swings them into place. Typically, the crane is on site for only one day.





The roof trusses show up on day two. It only takes a couple of carpenters to frame the house, and it's a much faster process, which demonstrates perhaps the best feature of panelization for this particular climate.

Whereas a classic stick-frame house may take eight weeks or more to get "under roof," Armstrong says, a panelized one takes an average of two weeks. That means a lot less time spent exposed to the elements. "When you expose a house to weather, you're going to have all those problems — mold, squeaky floors, shrinking," Armstrong says.

In addition, building a house using this method significantly cuts down on waste since the wood doesn't have to be cut on site, making it more environmentally friendly than stick framing, Armstrong says.

Sometimes a house plan will call for a design feature that panelized construction can't accommodate: tall windows, for example. In those instances, Armstrong Homes can use a combination of panelization and classic stick framing. The company can also design and construct remodels and additions using the panels.

Armstrong estimates that 65 percent of the houses his company builds are turnkey, or ready for owners to move in, but 35 percent are owner-built. For homeowners who have the time and the desire to serve as their own general contractors, Armstrong Homes can serve



as a guide, something John Armstrong is happy to do.

"We have no problem setting up the relationship with all our subcontractors," Armstrong says. "The last thing I want to do is send them out to use the phone book to figure out who to hire."

This concern for his clients appears to be both part of his uncle's legacy and also natural to his personality. "I have a lot of favorite customers," Armstrong says. "I would not be doing what I do if I did not love the people. The thing that drives me is the relationship with the client."

Armstrong has lived on the Kitsap Peninsula since 1968, although for 20 years he divided his time between the company's offices in Redmond and Bremerton. In the Bremerton office full-time since 1990, he says the company builds approximately 20 houses a year in Kitsap, Mason and Jefferson counties. "This is a great community to work for and with," he says.

Since a home is the single biggest purchase most people will make in their lifetimes, Armstrong encourages them to check out the marketplace and to interview as many builders as they can, to make sure they are comfortable with the builder they choose.

Being honest, fair and available to customers, he says, is something the company stands by. "Those words are fairly chic, but we really, really, really believe them," he adds.

MORE INFORMATION

Want to find out more about panelized home building? Check out the information and videos at www.armstrong-homes.com.