

Housatonic firm brings affordable focus to custom design services

BY JOHN TOWNES

Providing affordable custom home design and construction services for people of average incomes is the goal of Creative Building Solutions LLC, which opened in January in a section of the Barbieri Lumber complex at 410 Park St. (Route 183) in Housatonic.

"The everyday person often doesn't have access to the skills of custom designers and builders," said Linda Shafiroff, co-owner of Creative Building Solutions. "We want to make those services available to people who want to build a quality home at a reasonable price they can afford."

So far, said Shafiroff, she and her business partner Sara Stiner have handled home-building projects ranging from \$100,000 up to \$450,000 — with the majority coming in between \$150,000 and \$275,000.

Shafiroff and Stiner can work with clients who either want a completely custom-tailored "stick-built" home, a modular house, or a combination of elements from these two approaches.

Their strategy is to combine the benefits of custom design and construction with the efficiency and savings of standardized designs, products and building methods.

Shafiroff said there are many cost-savings measures available to reduce expenses and keep the final project within the original budget, while maintaining quality and the flexibility to custom tailor a home.

Creative Building Solutions works for a fixed fee, usually 10 percent of the total cost of a project, according to Shafiroff. "Our policy is to keep the project within the budget set by the client, so they know what they are paying up front," she noted. "We know how to control costs, and we make sure that all of the specific expenses are clearly broken down."

Complementary experience

The two women met in college. Shafiroff said in their education and subsequent careers they have gained first-hand knowledge and experience in real estate, surveying, site planning, permitting, building design and other aspects of design and construction over the years.

Shafiroff, who is married, took some time off to have her second child. When she was ready to return to work, she and Stiner decided to go into business for themselves utilizing their combined expertise.

"Between us we've had over 20 years experience in all phases of the building process," said Shafiroff. "We can work with people from the time they start thinking about building their own home to the selection of land through design and construction."

Their services include helping clients select an appropriate site and determining the placement of the house on it, designing the home, purchasing materials, permitting, coordinating its construction and acting as a liaison and advocate for the client with subcontractors and suppliers.

Generally, she said, they encourage clients to first determine their budget and to come up with a specific concept for what they would ideally like in their house. "That's a starting point," she said. "Then we'll sit down with them and discuss how much of that can be done within their price range. Then we work up a design based on that."

"When necessary, we advise them on how they can reduce the cost and stay within their budget in specific ways," she added. "For example, if they want a particular type of wood for their kitchen cabinets but need to reduce their overall costs, I can show them alternatives that are similar but less expensive."

She added that the decision to custom build a home or use a modular home depends on a variety of factors.



Linda Shafiroff of Creative Building Solutions takes a break to pose for a photo during installation of a modular home showroom next to her firm's office in the Barbieri Lumber complex.

Among other options, Creative Building Solutions has arrangements with several modular home-building companies, who have agreed to provide more custom-tailored versions of their standard designs.

"People sometimes object to modular homes because of their image and lack of choices," Shafiroff said. "But by working with both the client and modular builders, we can combine the advantages of a custom-built home and a modular one."

In other instances, Shafiroff will provide a custom design herself based on the client's goals. She said she has files of standardized design elements she can incorporate into a plan, or design one herself from scratch.

Not general contractors

They also work with the client through the construction process. Although they are not general contractors, she said they fill a similar role in terms of hiring and supervising subcontractors and overseeing the process for the client. While the client actually pays the people who are contracted for services themselves, Creative Building Solutions serves as an advocate for the client's interests.

"We have the experience to deal with con-

tractors knowledgeably," said Shafiroff. "We encourage the client and the subcontractors to work with us as a team. If there is a possibility a job is going to come in over the estimate, we'll work on behalf of the client to find a solution to satisfy both parties."

One reason the services of Creative Building Solutions are less expensive than other approaches, said Shafiroff, is that while they have the necessary licenses and qualifications to handle home-building projects, they do not have the advanced certifications of specialized professionals like architects.

For example, they have a state construction supervisors license which makes them eligible to oversee projects. However, they are not licensed as general contractors, and they charge less as a result.

"There are advantage in using a licensed general contractor," Shafiroff explained. "Their licenses require them to guarantee all work for a specified period of time after a job is completed. We don't do that. So the downside of using us is that if the plumbing leaks several months after the house is completed, you have to take care of it yourself. So you have to decide whether that is something you're comfortable with to reduce the cost."

While the majority of their emphasis is on complete projects, Creative Building Solutions will also provide individual services, such as design, for those who handle other aspects of a project separately.

In addition to projects initiated by buyers, Shafiroff and Stiner also develop turnkey home packages. They work on their own or with developers to select sites, design a home for it, and offer both the land and construction of it as a package. "Or if the buyer wants the site but a different type of house, we can design and built that on the site instead," said Shafiroff.

She said they place a high priority on the environmental aspects of their work.

"We want to help keep the Berkshires beautiful," she said. "We believe it's important for people to be more environmentally responsible when developing land. But at the same time, there is also a great need for more affordable housing here. So those concerns have to be balanced."

"Our goal is to build homes that are attractive and fit in with the site, and to make sure land that is developed isn't horribly split up," she said.

Creative Building Solutions is leasing a large loft-style space on the third floor of one end of the Barbieri lumber mill complex. In January 2001, that property suffered extensive damage in a fire. Creative Building Solutions is in a brick portion that survived the fire. The space was extensively renovated to put it back into use.

Their 2,200-square-foot office includes a large open display area where a kitchen and other sample elements are on display. In addition, in early April they installed a modular home outside the building, which they use to display options and as a meeting area for clients who can't navigate the stairs to their main office.

"These give people a chance to visualize the type of things that can be done," said Shafiroff. "From there, we can talk about how we can come up with something specifically for them."

In the few months since launching their venture, Shafiroff said they have been kept busy with a number of projects, most of them through referrals and word-of-mouth. "We're already busy, so we're encouraged," she said. ♦

