

Glass Houses

By Dave Hansen

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The glass house sits high atop a knobby hill overlooking Malibu. It looks as if it erupted from the earth, and then settled into plates of fine lines and perfectly positioned spaces. On clear days through its windows, one can see across the Pacific to eternity.

One vision, one house and one very long piece of red tape.

Welcome to the world of custom home building, where dream homes sometimes take years to complete, with unexpected cost overruns and strained relationships.

But Mercer Island architect George Daniel Wittman knows about perseverance. It took Wittman, and colleague Hagy Belzberg, five years to design and build the home in the movie "The Glass House," which opened in theaters Sept. 14.

"I was really excited about this project," said Wittman, 42, "because it had all the elements that an architect dreams of: carte blanche with the design process; the freedom to create something really unique; the ability to see it through from the design process through construction, and working with a client who had a design sense and a lot of enthusiasm for the project."

There were struggles, however, with getting the house built — not the least of which was the adjacent National Park Service land and a history of habitation by the Chumash Indians, whose rock art and burial grounds dot the area. The 32-acre home site, which was zoned Coastal Open Space, underwent extensive reviews by several agencies, including the county of Ventura, California Coastal Commission, Archaeological Survey Report and others.

"One of the biggest (obstacles) was the ability to get a project built that adjoined National Park Service land," said Wittman, a member of the Design Commission for the city of Mercer Island. "There was a lot of negotiation with the superintendent of the National Park Service for the Santa Monica Mountains. There were a lot of restrictions that were imposed on the balance of the project and the area where we were building."

In the end, 95 percent of the site remained untouched. The 7,000-square-foot house cost \$2.5 million to design and build and was completed in 1998.

Wittman's experience with the glass house mirrors that of other local architects who spend most of their time maneuvering through the "system," particularly when they are instrumental in the building process.

Johan Luchsinger, a principal at Baylis Architects in Bellevue and an 18-year veteran in the industry, said a lot has changed during the last few years.

"There's more to do for us now — entitlements and hoops to jump through," Luchsinger said. "It costs more for us, and people worry about fees. But it takes us a lot longer to go through the system, which causes the fees to be higher."

Luchsinger specializes in custom homes and said smaller projects often don't get the attention from the necessary officials that larger projects command. He cited one recent example of a biologist that was only in the office on Tuesdays.

"That didn't go over very well with the client," Luchsinger said.

Carolyn Forbes, program director for the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects, said the industry is undergoing a significant change in the way projects are built.

"Sustainable design is a huge educational effort," Forbes said, citing the public requirements for more environmentally friendly buildings. "That has architects scrambling."

Forbes said Seattle is one of the first cities in the country enforcing "green design" rules, which often fall under specifications by the U.S. Green Building Council.

While Forbes said public buildings might benefit from the new rules, residential homeowners often do not like paying for the extra costs.

"The client on the residential side is either very interested or they don't really care about it," she said.

Luchsinger agreed, but said homeowners would benefit from looking at the long-term.

"A lot of it comes down to the bottom line," he said. "There are a lot of first costs, but down the road, it's going to save the client money."

For Wittman's glass house, keeping costs down was important as well.

"The owner said he had a limited budget and a strong distrust of contractors based on experience with other projects at home and at work," Wittman said. "Once we gained his confidence by doing things on a timely basis, being detailed in our approach, etc., he ultimately felt comfortable asking us to manage the construction process on his behalf."

Most architects agree that the No. 1 key to keeping costs down on custom homes is creating a detailed drawing early on, then bringing in a builder as soon as possible to flesh out realistic costs.

If everything goes according to plan, then perhaps someday everyone can stand on the curb and enjoy the final creation.

"Architecture is tending to be a very pedestrian business," Wittman said. "So it was refreshing to work on the glass house. Take the path less traveled and good things can come of it."

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