

Residential interior designer Liz Harris no stranger to construction sites in the region — on the go, the hands-on business operator makes rounds at her custom home sites to ensure project quality

By Ken Datzman

INDIALANTIC — At 8:30 on a weekday morning as the sun begins to sizzle, interior designer Liz Harris parks her BMW station wagon and walks across the street to a construction site in The Cloisters single-family home community.

The only woman at the location, Harris cheerily greets the landscapers and craftsmen as she makes her way inside a sizable custom home being built by general contractor Joyal Construction Inc.

The home is being constructed for a physician and his family. The owner hired Harris' company, residential specialist Designers West Interiors of Indialantic, to create a look that reflects their personal taste and lifestyle. "Every custom home is different and every family is unique in its own way. This is a fun project," she says, standing in the kitchen checking a shipment of custom cabinets.

Interior designers work in a wide range of environments, not only in the comfort of their offices. Harris is often on the go, traveling from one site to another to ensure the quality of her projects. She is a hands-on business operator, working closely with building contractors and other industry professionals. Interior designers such as Harris work under stress to meet deadlines, stay on budget, and please their clients. "I've done this for a long time. It's all very rewarding to me."

The two-story home, in its finishing stage, is very detailed. It's the kind of project that Harris, president and owner of New Traditions Interiors Ltd., doing business as Designers West Interiors, relishes and stays on top of month after month as the house takes form. The upper-end home market is where her firm has cut its niche, and gained a reputation for winning over customers.

"This is a typical job where I would be on the site from time to time each week making sure everything is coming together nicely," said Harris, who has built a thriving interior-design practice since arriving in Brevard two decades ago from the Midwest. "This is what I do best. I feel very comfortable at construction sites. I have known this family for a long time and have done other projects for them. The work I'm doing here really fits the profile of my typical client."

From designing and arranging spaces to shopping for furniture and household accessories to coordinating with architects, electricians, plumbers, installers and delivery men, the demands for each job require a wide spectrum of ability and professionalism. Designers say it's important for the client to meet with them early on in the planning process and stay involved. For this project, her firm is providing a full range of design services, including picking the trim, window coverings, lighting, tile, crown molding, high-end kitchen cabinetry, and other materials and products that will be used to furnish the home in a spectacular fashion.

The kitchen area is a centerpiece of the house. The best kitchen plans include functionality and good design, she said. "This kitchen has multiple sinks and multiple areas for work and prep. And we're putting in commercial-quality, stainless-steel appliances." While kitchens have long been the hub of the house, their importance has grown even more as families' lives get busier. A big trend right now: Clients want to incorporate more light into their kitchens, and they want bright, airy and well-ventilated space in a room they use not only for cooking and eating, but also for family gatherings and entertaining.

Harris, an Iowa State University graduate and member of the American Society of Interior Designers, says a lot of her clients are extending home space into the outdoors. Outdoor living spaces have become personal retreats for some families. "This is a great example," she says, showing off a large outdoor section of the home that features a complete kitchen and dining area.

Susan Hall, a talented landscape architect, is making the outdoor area a showcase. Her company was hired to do the landscaping. "She has some really innovative ideas," Harris said. Hall is president of Hall Bell Aquí Inc., with offices in Merritt Island and Miami. Her business has been featured in a dozen magazines, including "Travel and Leisure," "Southern Living" and "Florida Architecture." Hall has a degree in landscape architecture from Purdue University.

The demand for design services tends to track with the fortunes of the economy. While housing starts have pulled back over the past year, Harris' firm remains busy



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Liz Harris heads Designers West Interiors, a residential specialist with its office in Indialantic. A member of the American Society of Industry Designers, Harris has worked in the industry for more than 25 years. She is on a construction site at The Cloisters in Indialantic, where her firm is involved in a custom-home project. The home is being built by Joyal Construction.

with a growing number of clients who are building custom homes in the local market. "I have customers who are looking to build today because they know that labor is available. Craftsmen on the construction sites tell me they have steady work, but they don't have it lined up for the next eight months like they used to." Harris adds, "The details make building a custom home a lot longer process, which we have known for a good while."

Designers West Interiors has several new-home projects in its pipeline of work, including large waterfront homes in Melbourne. "We've been blessed with a great clientele."

Custom home builders and architects appear to be faring better than large production builders during the current housing downturn, according to a recent survey by "Residential Design & Build" magazine. Nearly 700 readers were surveyed for the publication's 2007 "Market Trends" article. Almost half represented construction businesses; 36 percent were from architecture firms and 15 percent worked for design-build companies. When asked to rate their outlook for the 2007 custom-home market, 58 percent of those polled said "excellent" or "good," while 34 percent said "fair."

The largest segment of the construction firms represented in the survey (34 percent) reported annual revenue between \$1 million and \$5 million. Most of the custom home-building and design firms that responded to the survey (66 percent) annually design or build 10 homes or fewer. The statistic closely aligns itself with the kind of volume a lot of custom builders do in the Brevard market.

For Harris' design firm, the custom-home projects continue to get bigger, in terms of square footage. A new custom house can be two or three times the size of a typical single-family home in America. "Home sizes have grown, definitely, for our firm. But we have seen Brevard evolve, too. In the last 20 years, a lot of people in this county have worked hard and have become successful. They want nice homes."

And her firm is satisfying their desires.