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ANDREW A. NELLES/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

The builder was willing to make alterations, including an upgraded kitchen, to the existing home plan to fit the needs of Iraida and Francisco Carrasco at their home in Des Plaines.

# Getting the home you want

## Modify an existing design to fit your needs

BY LESLIE MANN | Special to the Tribune

When Iraida and Francisco Carrasco were shopping for a town house, they were thrilled with discovering the Coventry model at Lexington Park in Des Plaines. It was tailor-made for their family, except for one thing. Or, maybe two. Well, make that a few things. Fortunately, their builder, Chicago-based Lexington Homes, was willing to make alterations to the existing home plan to fit the needs of their family, which includes two sons and Iraida's mother, Carmen Morales.

Priorities included adding a bedroom suite for Morales and replacing a tub with a shower. ("Who has time to take a bath?" said Iraida, a working mom.) Three bedrooms were enhanced with vaulted ceilings and the stairway with a railing. The kitchen was upgraded with a backsplash, and hardwood flooring was added.

Gone are the days when it was the norm for a homebuyer to have a choice between models A, B and C and have a clone of every third house on the block.

In this competitive housing market, builders are more willing to alter plans to suit homebuyers' needs. And a multitude of construction products provides so many combinations of choices that your new house is not likely to resemble your neighbor's.

"All builders, large and small, are offering more and better choices," said Stephen Melman, director of economic services at the National Association of Home Builders. "If the next guy is offering choices, I had better do the same to be competitive. So builders are not only flexible, but many have sufficient knowledge about new products to make recommendations or at least offer suggestions and options."

Also, the consumer and the builder are better-educated and take advantage of resources such as more sophisticated manufacturers' websites and seminars at home improvement stores, he said.

Most new homes are production or semicustom, said Tim Costello, chief executive of Austin, Texas-based Builder Homesite Inc., a consortium of 27 builders.

"(The homes) range from 'we'll change the plans somewhat' to 'we'll change anything,'" he said. "Big-ticket changes are structural ones that affect the foundation or roof. The next tier is the kitchen, where you can easily upgrade from \$25,000 to \$100,000 without moving one wall. The lowest tier is nonstructural changes, which change the look without changing the floor plan."

To narrow choices, Costello recommends touring

model homes in your price range, in and out of your target neighborhood. Websites such as [houzz.com](http://houzz.com) and [pinterest.com](http://pinterest.com) can help you define your favorite style so you know, for example, what the builder means when he says "craftsman," Costello said.

Visit builders' design centers.

"There are so, so many floor plan changes and product selections you can make," Costello said. "But design centers have narrowed them down. Many have them online so you can make your decisions at home."

Your lifestyle will dictate your alterations.

"If you have a busy family with kids and dogs, the

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LINDA OYAMA BRYAN/ORREN PICKELL BUILDING GROUP PHOTO

Custom building allows "anything under the sun," says homebuilder Orren Pickell.

drop-zone area between the garage and the kitchen is the most important, so it has to be big enough for things like lockers," Costello said. "If you're empty nesters who cook, you can pick the same house but with a big kitchen instead."

If you shop for your own products or bring your own product, tell the builder right away, because even cosmetic changes can trigger floor plan changes. Using your old fireplace mantel from Grandma's old farmhouse, for example, may mean you take the builder's "no mantel" option now and hire a contractor to install it later. But the builder must make the wall wide and strong enough to accommodate the mantel.

Some towns do not issue occupancy permits unless everything is in place. So delaying installation of things like appliances is not always possible.

Ignore room names on the builder's floor plan, said Sandi Priola, designer with Mark David Designs in Lake Forest.

"Just because it's called a library doesn't mean you want a library," she said. "Replace glass with wood doors and add a bathroom and closet to make it the guest room you need."

If you need more square footage, consider using

space over the garage, bumping out rooms, finishing the basement or turning wide hallways into lofts.

Another option is to customize the house without altering the floor plan.

"Replace builder-grade countertops or hardware or add things the builder doesn't include, like backsplashes," Priola said. "We completely changed the look of a client's bathrooms by replacing the builder's pedestal sinks with cabinetry."

Before the builder paints the whole house white, choose your favorite colors, Priola said.

Art niches between studs, which some builders cite as popular options, allow you to display decorative items without moving wall studs.

Smart builders change their offerings with changing demographics.

"More often, the buyer has a multigenerational family," said Jeanne Martini, director of sales and marketing for Kinzie Builders in Chicago, which offers semicustom houses in the Enclave of Heritage Estates in Lake Barrington.

"We'll include suites for family members who visit from overseas for months at a time or for grown children who don't want to live in the basement."

If you want to make many changes to an existing blueprint, you might be better off custom building to have a house designed just for you.

"With a production house, you get new, but you make compromises," said Orren Pickell, president and chief executive of Orren Pickell Building Group in Northfield. "With custom building, you can have anything under the sun."

That includes green components rarely found in production homes, like solar panels and geothermal systems.

Custom building is typically the only way to get the "jewel box" (small but upscale) homes that empty nesters want, because most small production homes are designed for young families on budgets.

The custom floor plan also can incorporate the stages of a family's life.

"Do you want the kids to live there forever, or do you want them to leave?" Pickell said. "Do you want your parents to move in? With custom, you can make these plans but stay put, because you already have the location you want. That's why people say 'location, location, location,' not 'house, house, house.'"

## HOME REMEDIES

# Can you dig it? Yes, with the right shovel

BY TIM CARTER  
 Tribune Content Agency

**Last weekend, I had to dig a trench and shovel gravel. It was very hard work and I struggled the entire time. My wife said I was using the wrong shovel for the job. I had a simple square-tipped shovel my dad gave me years ago. The sides are bent up slightly. The gravel I was shoveling was slightly angular and the size of pieces of medium to large shrimp, if that helps you visualize what I was working with. I've got lots more digging to do and must discover an easier way.**

— Patrick S.

Digging dirt and moving gravel by hand is a tough job. To maximize progress and minimize work, you must use the right tools. I have no fewer than five different shovels that I use for working in dirt and moving gravel. These days, even homeowners have a variety of backhoes and excavators available to rent — you may discover this is the way to tackle future digging tasks. But back to the question at hand.

The metal teeth on mechanized digging equipment are meant to make the initial cut into soil to loosen it so the surface area of the main body of the bucket experiences less friction. It's all about friction when you dig.

The less friction, the less work you have to do to move the shovel through the material.

If you want to cut into soil or dig into a pile of medium or coarse gravel, I suggest you use a round point shovel. This tool is shaped much like a spoon you'd have in your kitchen drawer. The tip of the shovel has a point and is shaped very similar to a broad or wide heart you'd see on a valentine card.



LAURIE CASEY/MORTON ARBORETUM PHOTO

Shovels are essential home tools that can be used for many tasks, from breaking up soil to scooping rocks.

The tip of the shovel produces minimum friction as it starts to cut into the material.

You had difficulty because you were trying to use a shovel that did not have a tip on its end. The entire edge of the shovel was trying to move its way through the soil. Since you only have a fixed amount of force pushing the shovel, this force is spread out across the entire edge of the shovel. When you use a round-point shovel, the same force is concentrated on the tip.

When shoveling gravel, I've discovered it is best to slide a round point shovel into the pile at about a 30-degree angle. Don't try to drive the shovel into the gravel straight on. That's tough on you and the shovel. Remember, it's all about friction. When I dig ditches in a sandy or clay soil, the two shovels I use are a duck-billed shovel and a flat-tipped garden spade. The duck-billed shovel is named because it closely resembles the bill on a duck. The blade of the shovel is nearly twice as long as the blade on a typical shovel. The blade is also much narrower.

This shape means that there's less metal in contact with the soil. Less

metal means less friction. Think of it this way: Imagine pushing a hypodermic needle into skin, and then imagine trying to puncture your skin with a flat screwdriver instead of a needle. You'd need much more force when using the screwdriver.

A small, flat garden spade is a fantastic tool to trim the sides of a trench if you want to create smooth side walls and a flat trench bottom. These spades shave moist clay soils like a hot knife cuts into butter.

The square-point shovel you were using is best suited to shovel dry or moist sand or any other powdered product. It's also great for shoveling fluffed mulch. However, if you try to push this shovel straight into a semi-compacted pile of mulch, you'll discover you don't get very far.

Do the same thing with a round-point shovel and it bites right into the mulch.

Clean shovels work best. Don't try to dig with hardened clay on the shovel surface. This just creates more friction.

Always clean shovels after you're finished with them. Oil the metal surface to prevent rust. You'll discover that, most of the time, it's easier to dig moist soil instead of dry.