

BUILDER SNAPSHOT

Pickell has a lock on luxury custom design

Builder credits client interaction, help from mentors

By Leslie Mann
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Designing a custom house is like assembling a combination lock, says Orren Pickell, president of Orren Pickell Designers & Builders in Lincolnshire. "There's a tumbler for the first floor, the second floor, the lot, the exterior, the husband's want list and the wife's," he says. "The design won't work until all the tumblers line up."

After 33 years in the business, Pickell knows the code. Each house or remodel begins with a pre-design meeting with the client, when the OPDB staff asks revealing questions such as, "What really bugs you about your current house that you would like to change?"

In addition to reviewing the client's wish file of clippings (most clients have them, says Pickell), they send the client into the community to photograph houses and rooms he does and doesn't like.

After the client works with OPDB's in-house architects and cabinet designers to design his house, the house gets its own Web site with timetables, architectural plans and photos. Only the client and the subcontractors receive the password.

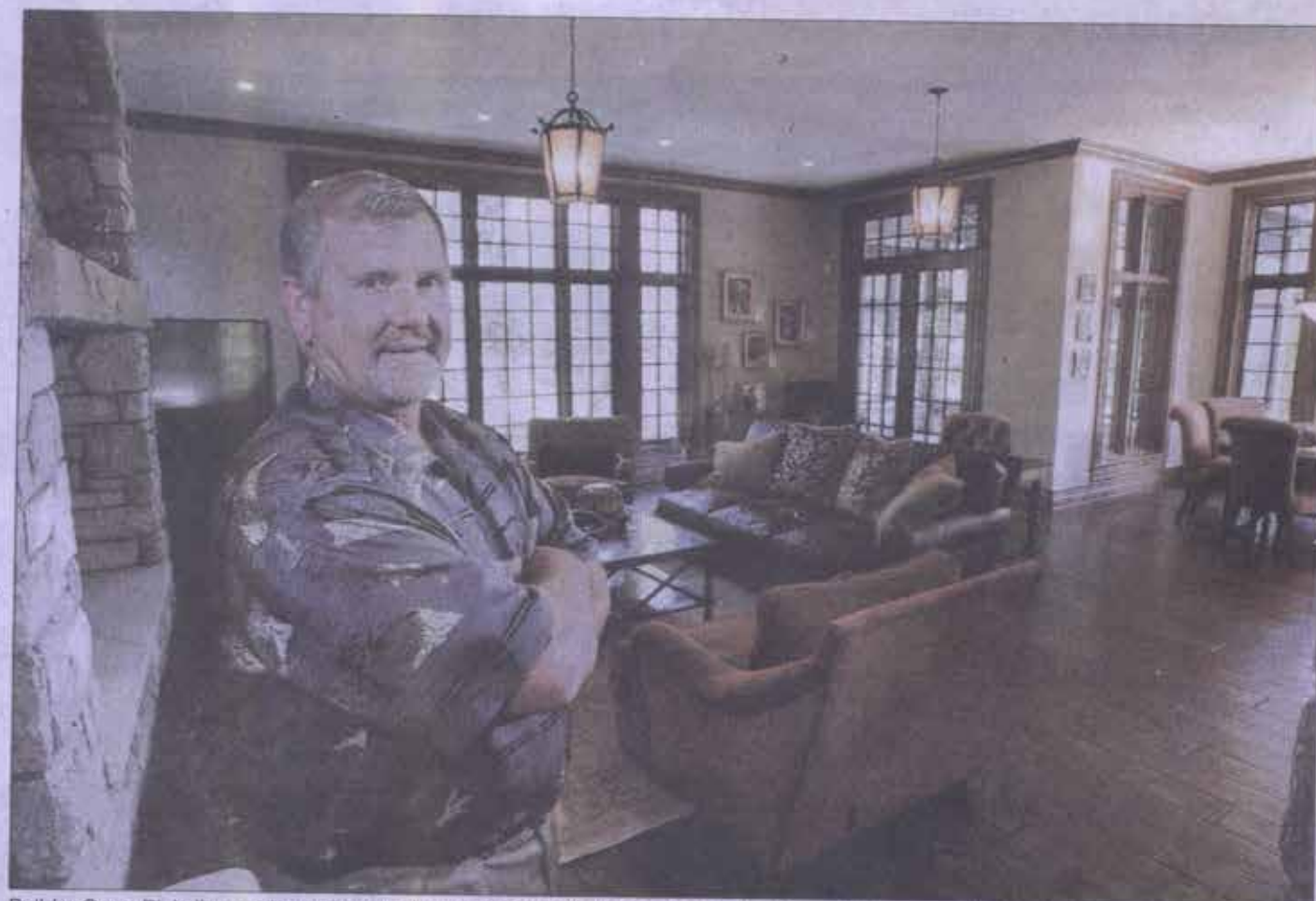
"Then, every time there's a change order or a purchase order, it is an open book—no secrets," Pickell explains.

What sets apart OPDB from many other custom builders is the company builds most of its houses on client-owned lots.

"The client doesn't have to hire us because we own the lot," says Pickell. "He chooses to work with us."

Today, the OPDB annual job roster includes 20 to 25 new houses, dozens of remodels and the servicing of the company's lifetime house warranties. OPDB houses, which range from \$750,000 to several million dollars, are scattered across northern Illinois, southern Wisconsin and southwestern Michigan.

Clients count on OPDB to keep up with "the latest and greatest" in amenities, says Pickell. Currently, that includes high-tech home automation systems, rough fin-



Builder Orren Pickell, president of Orren Pickell Designers & Builders in Lincolnshire, in his company's Scottish Manor concept house, a 9,000-square-foot residence in the Tarns Moor subdivision in Bannockburn. DAVID TROTMAN-WILKINS/TRIBUNE

ishes that can take kids and dogs, and recreational extras such as sport courts. "I call those grandkid bribes," says Pickell of the latter.

Pickell also sees a trend toward higher-quality materials but less square footage, as touted by the "Not So Big House" book series by architect Sarah Susanka.

"More clients now tell me they want to use 100 percent of their houses instead of having some rooms that are just for show or are 'annual

rooms' that they just use, for example, for holiday dinners," he says.

Pickell is quick to credit three mentors for helping him grow his company: Oak Brook painter Tom Keck for giving him his first job in the trades; Fred Doladee of Addison for helping him build his first house in 1975; and Don Slowick of Evergreen, Colo., for teaching him how to run a business.

Now, OPDB is in its second generation, with Pickell's

daughter Lisa as the marketing director. (Sons Matthew and Eric are studying nursing and political science, respectively.)

Off-duty, the family sails, skis or hangs out at their vacation house in Lake Geneva, Wis.

After collecting a string of awards for its South Shore Club project in Lake Geneva, OPDB has some similar, single-family, maintenance-free developments under way, including The Penin-

sula in New Buffalo, Mich., and The Manors in South Haven, Mich.

Growing up with an unusual first name and an often-mispronounced last name wasn't easy, admits Pickell, a native of Elmhurst. "I just wanted to be called 'Chuck,'" he admits. But, now he appreciates his name, he says, because it is memorable.

"Now, my name is my brand," he says. "And my brand is my promise."

When your competition is literally on the block

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gets new carpeting laid, it's worth considering for your

location or little tidbits of extra information detailed on the listing sheet.

Selling strategy is even more important in newer subdivisions where builders

it comes to setting a listing price.

"Maybe you are at the top

Preferred Properties in Libertyville, advises a more aggressive stance. "You have

Matheson worries that sometimes the competition between neighbors just goes