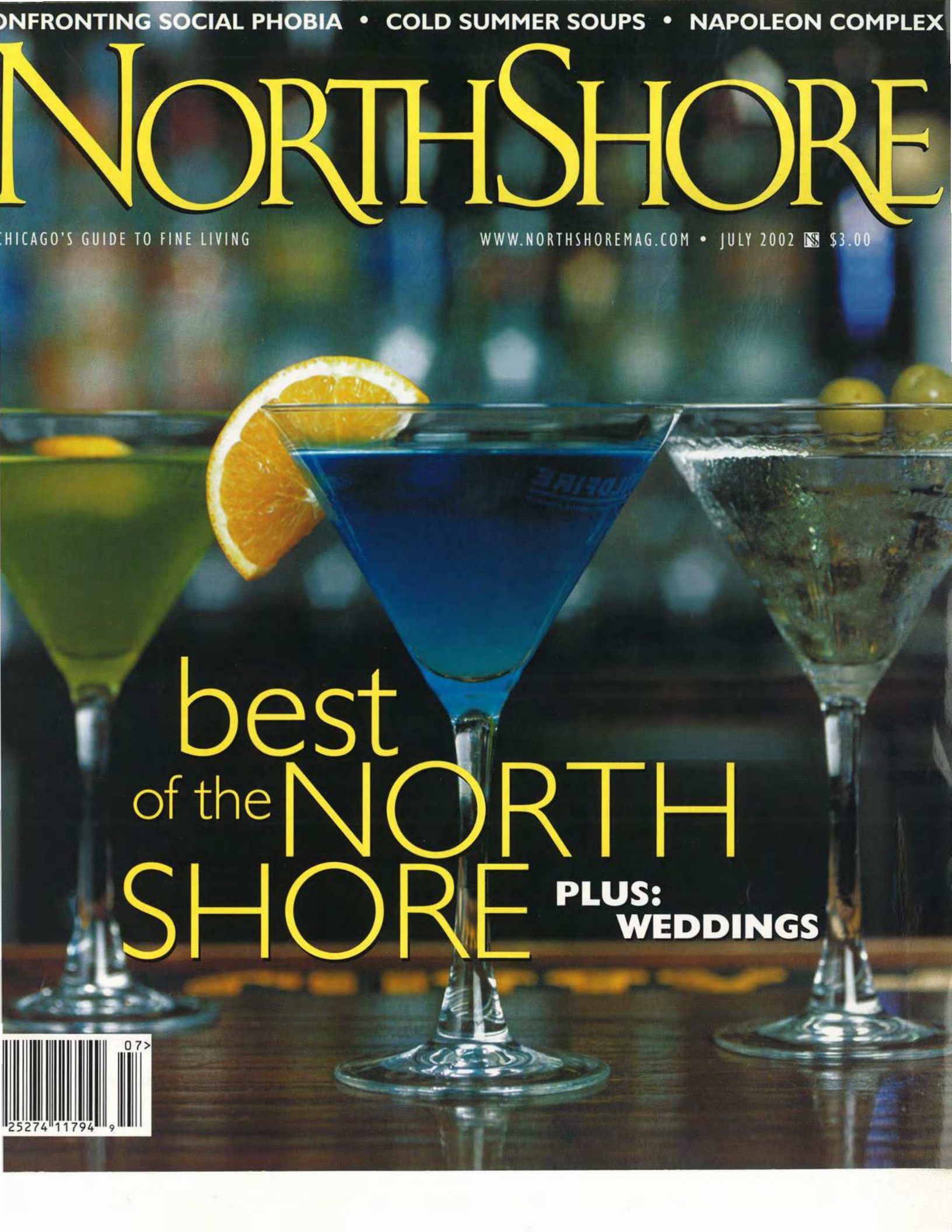


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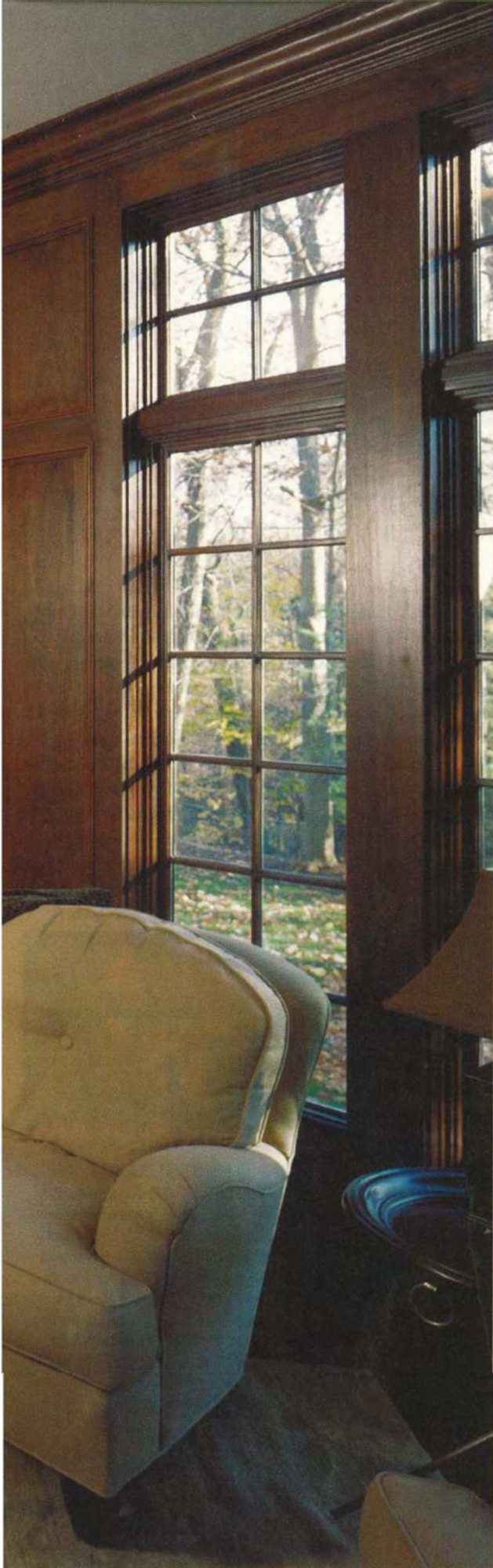
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The den in the Renaissance.com House, Orren Pickell's most expensive concept home.



RENAISSANCE HOUSES

STORY BY MARY MAGUIRE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA OYAMA BRYAN

Builder Orren Pickell has taken risks by building multi-million dollar homes on spec, but the gamble is clearly paying off

RICHARD BUXBAUM ANSWERS HIS home phone with a hearty hello, but he doesn't have time to talk. He's watching a movie with his wife and wants to enjoy his popcorn while it's still hot. So he politely invites the caller to ring him again in 10 minutes — after he has finished his snack.

It's a great coincidence because the caller wants information about the Highland Park couple's purchase, three years ago, of the Entertainment House, a concept home built, named and marketed for its amenities: an elegant espresso bar, computerized lighting and large open spaces ideal for entertaining. But the home's centerpiece is a 12-seat movie theater complete with a jumbo screen, stereo sound and industrial strength popcorn maker.

"When we bought the house, the theater had 12 seats just like you'd find at a public theater, but we ripped them out because they were cramped and quite uncomfortable," says Robin Buxbaum, who filled the room with seven plump and cushy lounge chairs. "We never see the kids when they're home from school because they're always in [the theater]."

While the Buxbaums bring new meaning to the concept of home movies, the theater wasn't the only reason they bought the home from Bannockburn's Orren Pickell Designers &

Builders. "It's in an excellent location, it's big, comfortable and just a nice family home," says Robin Buxbaum.

The movie theater did, however, play a central role in Pickell's marketing efforts. Since 1995, the company has built seven luxury model homes based around various concepts and design themes, such as entertainment, technology and the environment. With price tags ranging from \$1.5 to \$3.5 million, each home is equipped with eye-popping features, such as a velvet curtained movie theater or an indoor driving range, and then opened to the public for tours. Linking admission to a local charity helps build walk-through traffic — and that's exactly the goal. The more people who cover their shoes with paper booties for a show home tour, the more people who will see Pickell's work — and perhaps hire him to build their new home. "The concept home is a calling card for us, and it shows the market what we can do," says Orren Pickell, president of the company.

While the concept home strategy isn't new — the industry calls them "spec" homes because they're made to the builder's specifications and then sold — Pickell appears to have struck a winning formula, judging by the thousands of people who arrive for tours.

Subsequent business generated by Pickell's concept homes resulted in the design

and construction of almost 30 homes last year worth more than \$40 million. That success also has helped the company add employees and expand its scope of business. Pickell started his company some 25 years ago with a friend and today he employs 17 architects and more than 50 other workers in construction, maintenance and project management. He also owns a cabinet distribution company and a software development firm that's trying to streamline the home building process through product design and selection.



ENTERTAINMENT HOUSE

HIGHLAND PARK: \$1.9 MILLION

Never leave Tara again. The Entertainment home features a 12-seat movie theatre complete with big screen, stereo sound, comfy chairs and computerized lighting. Showtime: whenever you want it to be. The only way to keep your friends away is to charge admission. The home's large open spaces and espresso bar are ideal for parties. There's also potential for two master bedroom suites on the second floor, one for the homeowner and the other for guests. At 5,850 square feet, the house has five bedrooms and seven baths.

The Transition House kitchen is quite spacious, with warm cabinetry, an oversized stove top and a large working and eating space.



In 1999 some 12,000 people visited the Transition House, a \$2 million Glen-coe home aimed at empty nesters. The design features large rooms and a flexible layout, allowing rooms to be used as guest suites, workout facilities or home offices. The elevated roof in the garage makes indoor basketball possible, while a giant sunken room is used as an indoor driving range.

The homes, which include the standard line-up of French country, Arts &

Crafts and Italian Renaissance style homes, are thought to be pretty but too cookie-cutter like. Although solidly constructed and expertly detailed, Orren Pickell's houses don't break any architectural ground. "A homeowner would be lucky to have [Orren Pickell] build their home, because he does excellent work," says Chicago architect Howard Hirsch. "But it's not going to be revolutionary stuff. This isn't Frank Gehry." Hirsch reinforces that he

greatly admires the company's building skills and knows Pickell through their membership in the Homebuilders Association of Greater Chicago.

While Pickell's work may not contribute much to architectural novelty or history, he certainly is leaving his mark on the North Shore, with homes built all through the northern suburbs.

Three years ago, Joanne Johnson and her family bought the Transition House in Glencoe while it was still in plans, and



The Transition House foyer (above) and garage (right) both have ceilings high enough for a basketball hoop. But you'll probably want to hang yours in the garage.



TRANSITION HOUSE

GLENCOE: \$2,000,000

Are the kids finally moving out? Turn your son's bedroom into an office. Have more ambitious plans? A spacious sunken basement can be a living room, driving range or field hockey rink. The grandkids will think you're cool if you put up a basketball net in the garage. The elevated ceiling in the garage makes it an ideal spot for a game of hoops. When the weather is nice, head outside to the backyard putting green and heated whirlpool tub. The Transition home offers a flexible layout that's perfect for empty nesters and sports enthusiasts. At 4,661 square feet, the house has five bedrooms and five baths.





TURN OF THE CENTURY HOUSE

KENILWORTH: \$2,049,000

Saved from the wrecking ball, the Turn of the Century home was refurbished to its original charm highlighting the home's oak floors and mahogany trim. The air and heating systems are new, of course, and a two-story 2,000 square foot addition, including a first floor family room and upstairs master bedroom suite, was part of the project. No one gathers around the radio anymore, and back in the '20s the concept of privacy for kids had not yet been invented. At 4,943 square feet, the house has four bedrooms and six baths.

she says her husband was delighted to learn they could not make any changes to the design of the custom home. (He was weary from five previous remodeling efforts.) But Johnson, herself, wished she could participate in the design of the interior. "I was so disappointed that I couldn't pick out the cabinets or even the doorknobs on the home my family was going to live in."

This is an unusual approach to the design and construction of a luxury home with a large price tag. Typically, the client maintains control over every decision, from the home's overall layout to the selection of the toilet paper holder. But when you buy a Pickell concept home, you buy his sense of interior design, too.

"I don't want clients tossing and turning at night because the architect and the interior designer are bickering or they think costs are going through the roof," says Pickell. "Building a home should be enjoyable."

Each concept home is the result of creative brainstorming among the Pickell



The Turn of the Century House living room showcases the home's mahogany trim.

firm's 17 architects, with additional input from other employees who are invited to contribute their own ideas. Their collective imaginations have spawned such creations as the Organization House in Riverwoods, designed for the industrious family needing to compartmentalize. The house features workstations and storage areas to help organize activity, including gift-wrapping and crafts stations, and a laundry center, each with mailboxes and lockers.

This first concept home didn't have a name — but it did have a \$1.6 million list price. It was built to showcase energy efficiency and became Custom Builder Magazine's 1995 show house.

The \$2 million Turn of the Century House in Kenilworth is unusual in that it was the first — and still the only — renovation to be included in the concept home series. The 75-year-old home was painstakingly refurbished; inside rooms such as the kitchen, master bedroom suite and great room were all expanded and adapted to fit the needs of a 21st century family.



ORGANIZATION HOUSE

RIVERWOODS: \$1.5 MILLION
\$760,000 IN 1996 + LOT

Have kids with hockey sticks, in-line skates, books, backpacks, tennis rackets and soccer balls? Every room in the Organization home offers built-in storage to hide the stuff that gets a busy family through the week.

There are cubbyholes and mailboxes for each member of the family and a few visitors. Invite Martha Stewart for the weekend. She'll feel right at home in the home's craft area and gift-wrapping station. A glue-gun is a good thing and the perfect housewarming gift. The home is 5,024 square feet, with four bedrooms and five baths.

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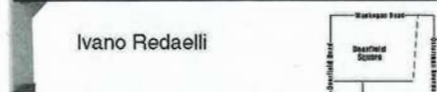
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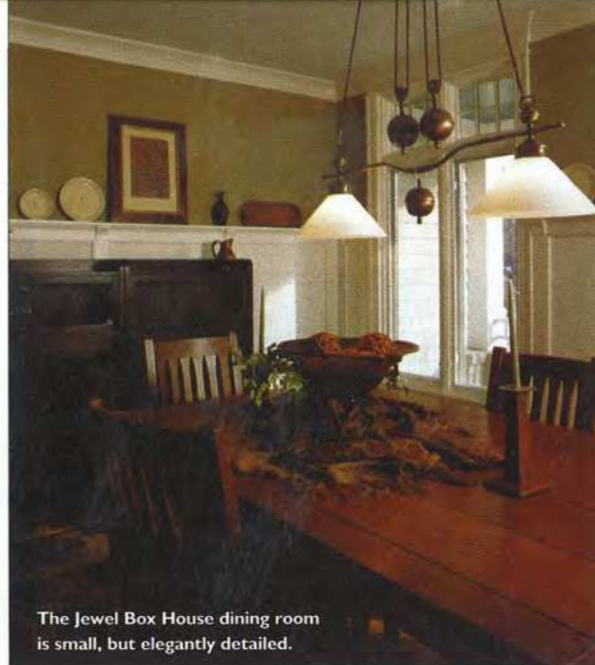
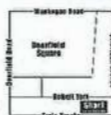


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The Jewel Box House dining room is small, but elegantly detailed.

And then there is The Jewel Box, the \$1.4 million homage in Lake Forest to the Arts & Crafts style. In each room the trim and custom woodwork is rich and detailed. The state-of-the-art kitchen has a slate tile floor and back splash, and custom cherry cabinets with antique-style seeded glass inserts. The living room has five levels of crown molding. The stone fireplace is made of the same stone as the exterior of the house.



THE JEWEL BOX

LAKE FOREST: \$1,395,000

Spend most of your free time outside? At 3,622 square feet, the Jewel Box may sound short on space but it's long on elegant details. The gourmet kitchen has custom-made cherry cabinets with antique-style seeded glass inserts and slate flooring and backsplash. The breakfast area opens to a family room complete with a stone fireplace and five levels of crown molding. All four bedrooms are located upstairs. The closet and bathroom for the master bedroom are not ensuite; they're located off a short hallway leading to the room. The Arts & Crafts style home features a stone facade with a narrow covered porch and a series of bay windows out front. The home has four bedrooms and three-and-a-half baths.

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The Renaissance.com kitchen juxtaposes modern flair with traditional cabinetry.



RENAISSANCE.COM HOUSE

GLENCOE: \$3,489,000

Can't wait for the cable guy? No problem. The Renaissance.com home can be programmed to let service workers or delivery people in while you watch from the office via computer. Doors can be locked and unlocked with the click of a mouse. An Internet controlled HVAC system controls heating and air conditioning at any point in the home. Because the home is technologically sophisticated, mom can cook dinner and keep an eye on the kids' TV and computer use upstairs. Don't like what they're watching? Turn it off without leaving the room. Controls are within easy reach of the stove. This Beaux Arts-style home has a brick and limestone facade, a majestic curved stairway in full view of the circular foyer and finished basement complete with bar/kitchenette, fireplace and wine cellar. There are two garages, including a two-car and single-car garage with ceilings high enough to play basketball. At 6,906 square feet, the home has five bedrooms and four baths.

Last fall saw the debut of the Renaissance.com House in Glencoe, which combines Italian Renaissance and Beaux Arts design elements with innovative technical gadgetry. Exotic woods, a sweeping staircase and a circular foyer lend visual spectacle to a house so electronically sophisticated that a global control center manages security, lighting and room temperatures. There are also plasma screen TVs that serve as a gallery of constantly changing artwork.

With a \$3.4 million list price, the Renaissance.com House has the highest price tag of any of Pickell's concept homes, and has spent more than seven months on the market. But a weakened economy and a steep, nationwide slowdown in housing starts (the Commerce



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THE VACATION HOUSE

LAKE GENEVA, WISCONSIN: \$3,650,000

A swanky beach house is going up on the shores of Lake Geneva. Pickell is building some 40 homes with multi-million dollar price tags and five levels of space, including a basement and rooftop sundeck. In between the plan calls for a first floor party area, gourmet kitchen, dining area, library and dorm-style bedrooms. The second floor includes four bedrooms, each with its own walk-in closet and bath. The third level offers another dormitory suite. The model home, at 5,200 square feet, opens in the fall.

It will also serve as the flagship of a \$100 million Concept Community called the South Shore Club. Forty-one acres, 41 homes, all in the \$2 to \$3 million price range, all around 6,000 square feet in size. The houses will have a European flair, and plans call for each to have its own boat slip. There will be a swimming pool, clay tennis courts and a bocce court, and walking trails scattered throughout the heavily wooded area.

Judging by the success of his recent efforts, Pickell seems destined to transform this concept into a profitable reality.

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CONCEPT HOUSE

RIVERWOODS: \$1.6 MILLION

Pickell's maiden voyage into concept homes started in 1995 with an emphasis on energy efficient heating and cooling systems and a tree-friendly building approach. There's an oversized hot tub in the back yard that can be used as a koi pond in the summer. Design features include a walnut trim library and limestone floors. At 5,200 square feet, the house has five bedrooms and six baths.

ORREN PICKELL TALKS ABOUT ARCHITECTURAL PLANNING

The meetings [with clients] usually take place over a 2-3 month period. The design team must be very good listeners during this process, interpreting not only the client's words, but also his and her feelings. To give the clients a starting point and tangible visual reference, architects first visit the site and make rough drawings of the home... They brainstorm with clients, brainstorm among themselves, create more refined renderings, and brainstorm with the clients again... The next set of drawings usually comes very close to the final plan. The most progressive firms have begun to create videotapes of computer-generated virtual reality "fly-bys," both inside and outside the house (even the landscaping is included!), to give the clients a more complete view of how their new home will look and flow... With a few final, personal touches from the client, the design is complete.

Adapted from *Luxury Homes and Lifestyles: Elements for the New Millennium. Ideas, Concepts and Structures* by Orren Pickell. Published by The Ashley Group, 1999.



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