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2016 Fourth Annual
Builders + Architects
Roundtable Discussion

Size Matters...

Story by Susan Heller | Photography by Neil Landino

„In building, renovating and resale. The conundrum for builders and architects is to anticipate and address the myriad factors that impact those realities while serving their clients with creativity as well as integrity. There are many moving parts in the world of home building and design, the most important of which is relationship.

The Roundtable Discussion is a popular and growing event, hosted by Sam Gault of Gault Energy & Stone. Many of the participants know one another and this event provides a welcome opportunity to talk shop and catch up before the more formal discussion begins. People who are new to the area or the event find opportunities to do the networking thing and get a sense of who builds what kind of architecture where, what the new trends are and importantly, create possibilities for crosspollination on future projects.

I've reported on the last three Builders + Architects Roundtable Discussions and I'm always impressed by the thought processes and pas-

sion these professionals bring to the party. As a professional creative, I am aware of how the times and economies of scale are impacting the marketplace, but it was fascinating to hear how the parameters defining generations, can and sometimes do supersede the general sensibilities of the times.

With over 40 of the top-tier builders and architects from Fairfield and Westchester County in attendance, there was plenty of intellectual fire power and experience to inform the discourse.

Publisher Matthew Kolk threw out the first question about the three basic categories: the 30 somethings, the 40's and early 50's and late 50's and older, age groups. His feeling was that typically, the 30 something's are building their first home and for the most part are not looking at the house as a home for the next 20 years. It's a place to start. The 40 to 50's crowd are into their second or third house, have a family and this one is the "big" one for them. The late 50's



demographic are often empty nesters seeking to downsize and free themselves from the costs of maintaining a large home. The question being, "Is this break down accurate for 2016 or have things shifted, and if so, toward what?"

As it turns out, different people have different definitions for the different generations. For the sake of consistency we'll define Baby Boomers as those born from 1946 to 1964. Gen X and Gen Y overlap, from 1965 to 1984 for the previous, and somewhere in the mid-1970s through the mid 1980's for the latter. And then you have the Millennials, mid 1980's to 2004 and everybody has something to say about them. The general mud-slinging cites them as bratty, entitled, spoiled and totally subsumed within whatever screen they're staring into.

So let's start there. In 2014 Forbes Magazine cited Fairfield County as one of the top 16 places in the nation for young professionals to work and





Ann Sellars



Howard Lathrop



Phillip Dodd

live. 2015 was the year that the Millennial population stepped up to and over the numbers of the Baby Boomer generation. Almost half of them were teens or younger when Facebook and iPhones began to rule the world. And by 2025, they will comprise fully 75% of the nation's work force.

According to some of our experts, the Millennials or as they're sometimes known, Generation Y, are in fact, a very tough generation to work with. In particular, the younger representatives of that group. That said, comments were also made to the effect that they were wise beyond their age and very discerning in their tastes. Younger clients are also more aware and better educated about issues of sustainability. They want low VOC paints and LED lighting, but what they don't want, is to be part of the process. They want to walk into a home and have it ready to live in. Literally. Outfitted with everything from top of the line pots and pans, hanging in a specially designed Not-So-Lazy Susan that keeps them from clanging and banging, to bath towels and wine glasses. They don't want traditional New England anything, they do want modern textures, innovative wall treatments and furnishings with lots of light and space for entertaining. When it comes to ultra-modern interiors, all bets are off which translates to exciting design possibilities. Over the years, one of the recurring themes of the Round Table discussions has been the disconnect between the creation of modern interiors for clients that facilitate family interaction (great rooms, lots of glass, integrated kitchens and family rooms) and the traditional presentation of exterior architecture.

Now that the Millennials outweigh the Baby Boomers, it may only be a matter of time before their progressive and insistent vision of a future that is keeping



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up with the times transforms the skylines of at least a few towns and certainly whole neighborhoods will eventually coalesce into completely new architectural presentations.

Naturally, the meme "There's an app for that" takes on a whole new meaning when considering Millennials. High-end digital entertainment is a given, sometimes with multiple screens in a single room as well as access to technology in every room. But they're also looking to create "smart" homes they can control from their tablet, phone or computer and not just state-of-the-art remote-controlled heating and cooling capabilities. They also want appliances such as a refrigerator (complete with a touch screen of its own) which will notify you if you're running low on yogurt (or champagne) or cookware you can adjust from the office by changing the temperature and the cook time so your meal will be ready as you roll into your geofencing-capable garage.

Addressing energy efficiency is continuing to enter the conversation across all generations; some want geo-thermal or solar, but the question is, are they willing to pay for it? The general consensus among the Roundtable was that many more natural products and technologies that address sustainability and don't gouge too deeply into the building budget need to be developed.

Generation X knows what they like. They are independent and want instant feedback but are also willing to listen. Having watched their Boomer parents deal with job insecurity, they strategized and created careers that ensured long term viability.

Still, there is something of a split with this group: luxury is still important (billiard room, double master suites, massage room, expansive wine cellar) but they're also concerned about potential resale. For instance, even though his clients maintain they would never actually use a tub, one architect explained, they wanted a luxury version installed for potential future resale cachet. Gen X'ers want to make the house fit the lifestyle they've evolved just in case it does end up being their forever home, or in case they want to hand it down to their kids. The tightrope walk for builders and architects is to help clients separate perception from reality.

Baby Boomers are also dealing with the "what-ifs" but in a different way. Many want to downsize, minimize the upkeep and maximize the high-end pieces they've grown to love. Perhaps create a comfortable home on a single floor, with no stairs. But what if they need space for the kids and grandkids to move into? It appears that a confluence of sociological and economic factors have conspired to create this "new" (more like historical) reality of generations living together. Built-in baby-sitters are one perk but so is the ability to take care of aging parents. So you have ceilings with silver-leaf finishes, a steam oven, an espresso machine, and five bedrooms instead of two? The kicker comes when in an attempt to have it both ways, a client will ask for a much smaller house but with a dining room/great room, that will accommodate twenty. So by the time all the different considerations are added in, a house that started "smaller" at 3,000sq. ft. or 4,000sq. ft., balloons to 8,000sq. ft. or 9,000sq. ft. Then there are those Boomers who are actually looking to upsize as they also assist their Gen Y kids buy homes. Security and storm-related issues have prompted new product development such as unbreakable windows. Ageing and health issues are being addressed by installing elevators. Many Boomers are also renovating existing homes, building up or alternately, increasing the footprint to accommodate quarters for kids and grandkids. Additional separate quarters across the pool or on the lower forty create the perfect place for retired friends to come stay for an extended play-date.

At the end of the day, what remains crucial is the relationship and ongoing communication between and among clients, architects and builders. It was noted by more than a few, that the intimacy and long-term interaction of renovating and building, require superior listening skills as well as a willingness to be up-front and honest about what will and what will not be in the best interests of their clients, whatever generation they hail from. The good news is that all of the professionals in attendance at the Roundtable have, as their over-arching intention, the desire to provide their clients with a space and a place they can call home.



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