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Beach cottage industry not big on building large

BY DON MANLEY • DMANLEY@NEWS-PRESS.COM • MAY 25, 2008

Arthur Monahan has been there, done that and moved beyond the bigger-is-better approach to home design. In fact, the Fort Myers Beach general contractor has formed a company with his sister and wife that focuses on building the polar opposite of the McMansion.

Their business, the Seacoast Cottage Co., is an adherent of the Not-So-Big architectural movement, which champions smaller homes and maximized space usage, over America's love affair with the large home.

"What we really believe in is the smaller home can really be a comfortable home," said Monahan, 44. Not So Big is a movement created by architect Sarah Susanka, who has published six books on the topic, the first in 1998.

Seacoast is the only Florida builder to be recognized by Susanka's Web site for embracing her philosophy in its home designs and building techniques.

Elements of Susanka's philosophy and touches from Old Florida architecture are present in Seacoast's three cottage designs, as are green-building, hurricane-resistant techniques. Those designs include:

~ Mango Cottage, a two-bedroom, two-bathroom home with 1,200 square feet of living area, a loft and a large front porch

~ Sabal Cottage, a three-bedroom, two-bathroom home with 2,023 square feet of living area and spacious decks on both floors

~ Banyan Cottage, a four-bedroom, three-bathroom home with 3,416 square feet of living area and a 1,092 square-foot, wrap-around porch

Monahan, his sister, Chicago architect Andrea Van Buren and his wife, Denise, who handles public relations and marketing, started the comp-pany in 2006. Design and engineering work on the three models began roughly 18 months ago.

Negotiations are under way with developers to build the cottages on Keewaydin Island off Naples; in Punta Gorda's historic district; and in Naples. Monahan is now in discussions with several developers on including the cottages in projects in the Caribbean.

The company recently purchased a lot in Sanibel's The Dunes development where it hopes to build its first home, a model Banyan Cottage. Those plans should be submitted to the city of Sanibel for permitting approval within about 60 days, Monahan said.

Seacoast's approach to building could be something Sanibel's planning commission will want to factor into its discussions of architectural guidelines that will maintain the island's small-town ambiance, said Paul Reynolds, a member of the commission.

Monahan's interest in the Not-So-Big approach stems from his upbringing in Key West and the Virgin Islands and more than 20 years experience building estate homes for his father's construction firm and other companies after graduating from Florida State University. He said the shotgun shacks and Cracker-style houses of Key West and the traditional Caribbean homes, with styles influenced by French and Dutch colonial architecture, left an indelible mark.



Arthur and Denise Monahan, the founder-construction contractor and marketing-public relations executive, respectively, for Seacoast Cottage Co. on Fort Myers Beach. (Don Manley/news-press.com)



The Sabal Cottage, a 2,023-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bathroom home designed by the Seacoast Cottage Co. of Fort Myers Beach. (special to news-press.com)

He said the cottages' wooden frames will be similar to a traditional home, but instead of wood, SIPs - Structural Insulated Panels - will be used for the walls, roofs and floors. These SIPs consist of a thick layer of a rigid foam, bordered on two sides by a lightweight, cement-like material. The SIP blocks are six-inches thick and a home's interior finishes adds about another two inches to the thickness.

SIPs make for an extremely strong building and also enhance energy conservation, because of their heat-resistant qualities, Monahan said.

Seacoast's homes are designed with sub-tropical and tropical climates in mind, with high ceilings to promote a feeling of cool spaciousness. Hurricanes are also taken into consideration. Monahan said the homes are designed to exceed wind-load requirements by 20 to 30 mph.

Smaller homes make smaller lot sizes possible and also encourage people to extend their living area outdoors to porches, yards and gardens, Monahan said.

Monahan said high-end customers will be the company's initial target, although he'd like to eventually get involved with affordable housing.

"The market that we're negotiating with, on all fronts, is people who want smaller square footage and they're going to put money into fit and finish, adding textures, high-end materials, wood floors throughout, high levels of detail and craftsmanship. It will be very rich-feeling housing," Monahan said.

"A lot of people, I think, are making the mistake of spending all their money on square footage, with the bigger is better philosophy. We're the opposite of that, which is you're money is better spent on finishes, adding texture and dimension to a well-crafted, smaller space, which creates a smaller personal space. That's our vision," he said.

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