



2017 AURORA AWARDS: Beyond teamwork

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Architecture is in large part art, but so is the process of building what the architect has drawn

With yet another top award in his trophy case, Sarasota builder Josh Wynne says communication is just as important to a project's success as the actual construction.

His company, Josh Wynne Construction, won the Golden Aurora Award for the "best in show" residential project at the recent Southeast Building Conference in Orlando. The competition drew more than 400 entries from across the Southeast in 54 categories — 10 of them won by Wynne.

The Riverview High graduate has won the Golden Aurora before — four times, in fact, since 2014. He says his success in the competition is due in part to his ability to summarize his projects in a concise 300 words on the entry form. Top-grade photography also plays a role, with Ryan Gamma of Sarasota providing the images for the 2017 winning entry, the "CompassHaus" on northern Longboat Key's Old Compass Road.

But all that comes after the drawing, pouring, hammering and painting, which was completed a year ago. Planning and construction is where communication is essential, Wynne said. The success of this project went beyond conventional teamwork among architect Jonathan Parks, interior designer Pam Holladay, green consultant Drew Smith, landscape architect Tim Borden, Stephen Wilbur of the Stirling Wilbur Engineering Group and Wynne.

Rather than a linear chain-of-command, with the owner directing the architect and the architect directing the builder, Wynne has found that the best results come from a circulating, collaborative approach.

"It is a process, a constant conversation," Wynne said. "I'm involved, the architect is involved, the client is involved — and we are all working to do something better and unique."

Reciprocal relationships

Across the bayou from CompassHaus, a modest, decades-old waterfront house is slated for demolition, to be replaced by a house designed by Jerry Sparkman of Sweet Sparkman Architects, and built by Wynne. Again, collaboration is Item No. 1 on their to-do list.

“We both believe that design and construction is a collaboration,” Sparkman said. “When you have a similar belief in what you have to offer, you can reach much further than when you see yourself in isolation from the other disciplines.”

The sharing of information can empower the builder to come up with “an approach to building” that can influence the architecture, Sparkman said.

“There is this reciprocal relationship — back and forth, back and forth — that makes the project better from many levels: performance, aesthetics, cost — all those things that benefit the owner,” he said. “And they don’t come from a linear process; they come through an iterative, organic process where ideas cycle back through, not just from the architect to the owner, but from the owner to the builder, back to the owner, to the architect.”

Sparkman said he and Wynne, through their work on other projects, including a new house on Siesta Key’s Higel Avenue with an energy efficiency HERS score of minus-25, have realized that they can achieve things together that they would not be able to do separately “unless we shared that common belief set.

“For one, good quality doesn’t mean it has to be high cost. Quality may actually come from doing less. The success of the project may come from doing less.”

So it is at CompassHaus, which sits on a superb lot where one might expect to find a much larger house. Instead, the house has 4,700 square feet and cost about \$2.1 million to build — about \$446 a square foot. It is not uncommon for new houses on bay or beach to cost \$1,000 a square foot or more.

“To get a zero-energy, LEED-Platinum, level-5 drywall, really forward house” for that cost represents “a ton of value,” Wynne said, who noted that the per-square-foot cost is about average for his projects. “And it is generated by that conversation, that team effort, the thing that we are always trying to do — deliver more for less and getting outside of that regular box that everyone’s in.”

Managing emotions

One professional with a rare perspective on the design-build process is John Pichette of Halflants + Pichette Studio for Modern Architecture in Sarasota. The company designs and builds unique modernist houses as well as townhouses in the Rosemary District.

While Pichette is a licensed architect and American Institute of Architects member, most of the designing in his firm is done by architect Michael Halflants, while Pichette does the building.

He must be doing something right, as AIA Florida just named Pichette its 2017 Builder of the Year.

“When you are doing a house, every single decision for the owner is an emotional decision, whether it is picking out tile or finishes, and it really needs a lot of hand-holding,” Pichette said.

“That is the hardest part of that job — keeping the clients happy, spending a lot of time with the clients, almost on a daily basis. One thing owners do not like is surprises,” Pichette said.

“No matter how much communication you have with the client, you can never have enough. Once you are communicating with them on a daily basis and they feel part of it, then it is just much smoother.”

Motivator and manager

Although he started in the business years ago as a carpenter, Wynne now describes himself as a motivator whose job is to inspire craftsmen to explore their craft.

“I try to only take projects that inspire me, and only take projects with people that allow us to find inspiration together,” Wynne said. “My role on these projects is as a manager. I don’t build anything. I orchestrate.”

And rather than do things the same way on each project, he encourages team members and subcontractors to think and speak out.

“I hate doing things the same way,” he said. “We all try to work outside of our roles and try to bring to the table something more than what our responsibilities are.

“We try to build something that is greater than the sum of the parts, developing a kit of parts for every project and then throwing the kit away at the end and starting from scratch.

“It doesn’t make it easy, but it sure does make it fun.”

Green, as usual

Wynne says, with some bemusement, that he is known as “the green builder” because his houses score exceedingly well on sustainability standards.

CompassHaus is no exception. The house, built to LEED-Platinum sustainability standards, has a HERS (Home Energy Rating System) index of 3, which means it uses 3 percent of the energy used by a house built to code minimums (the HERS baseline of 100). Dennis Stroer of Calcs-Plus in Venice did the EPA EnergyStar certification.

LEED is the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standard of the United States Green Building Coalition.

Drew Smith of Two Trails said the owners, a cardiologist and his wife, a journalist and lawyer, from the Philadelphia area, were dedicated to both aesthetics and sustainability from the start.

“They were very entrenched in that process and wanted to make sure they had the highest level of (LEED) certification they could get and the lowest energy demand,” Smith said. “They understood early on that the better the house was designed, the fewer photovoltaics they would have to put on their roof to make it work.”

That turned out to be a 10.23-kilowatt array, installed by Andrew Tanner of Region Solar in Sarasota.

And having Smith involved in meetings during the design stage allowed his company to recalculate the house’s expected energy performance as Parks tweaked the design.

So far, the house is “far exceeding what we expected” in its energy performance, Smith said.

Just another benefit of talking things through.

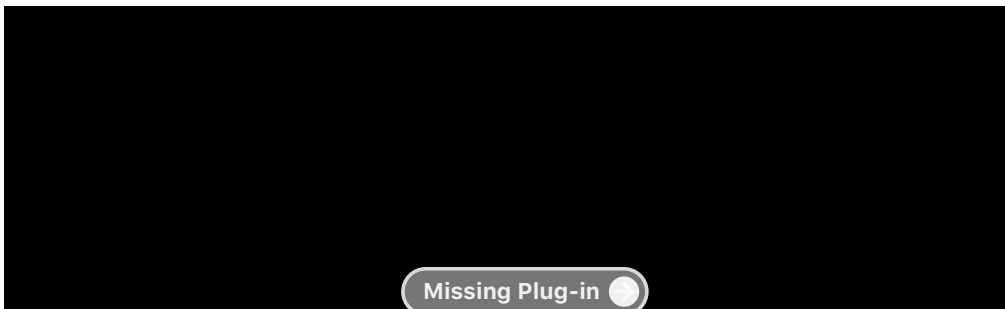
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