Custom Builder

CASE STUDIES & CLIENT INSIGHTS

Inside the Homes Going Up in Silicon Valley

Four custom homes reveal how architects and builders respond to the region's demands, from site constraints and energy performance to the needs of tech-industry clients

INTRODUCTION

Silicon Valley's custom homes reflect a range of demands on residential design and construction. The four projects in this guide span a 1,850-square-foot house in Cupertino to a 7,600-square-foot home in Los Altos, with different approaches to space, performance, and the needs of the people who live there.

In Sunnyvale, a backyard ADU provides space for work. In Fremont, lower-level suites accommodate extended family. A Cupertino home exceeds net-zero targets, while a Los Altos house draws on passive building principles.

The projects show how design teams respond to the demands of individual sites and homeowners. The second half of the guide examines how to work with tech-industry clients. Architects describe buyers who take an active role in the design process and want to understand the systems behind their homes. Builders explain how they are adapting project management and client services to meet the expectations of these highly-involved clients.

IN THIS GUIDE

THE HOMES

04	SUNNYVALE	Silicon Valley Home Lives Up to Its Custom Approach
07	FREMONT	Steep Flag Lot Shaped Every Decision in This Contemporary California Home
10	CUPERTINO	Cupertino Home Puts a Contemporary Spin on Traditional Japanese Design
13	LOS ALTOS	A New Los Altos Home Fans Out Across a Wedge-Shaped Lot

WORKING WITH THE TECH CLIENT

19	CLIENTS	Tech Workers Don't Want the Homes You'd Think
24	BUSINESS	High-Investment, High-Touch: The Rise of Construction Concierges

THE HOMES

SUNNYVALE, CALIF.

VIEW ONLINE →

Silicon Valley Home Lives Up to Its Custom Approach

A central courtyard and a roof that's pitched to look as if it's flying away give this 2,775-square-foot home a truly custom feel

When setting out to build his own family home, second-generation builder and founder of Sunnyvale, Calif.-based Integrum Construction, Sergio Rodriguez knew the last thing he wanted was a house that could have been for just anyone. "I didn't want to build a spec home," he says. He wanted a custom home designed for the way his family lives.

After finding a modest 55-foot-by-55-foot lot, Rodriguez paired up with Mahya Salehi Studio Architects to build a 2,775-square-foot home shaped by that goal. The house is built around a central courtyard and topped with a complex butterfly roofline, which gives the home a look uniquely its own.

A Central Courtyard Drives the Floorplan

Tight lot lines could be viewed as a challenge, but the team decided to use them to shape the floor plan, opting for a central courtyard that optimizes outdoor space rather than a small side or rear yard. The layout also allowed the project team to preserve a mature redwood tree in the backyard.

The idea for the courtyard wasn’t always part of the plan. Salehi says things just fell into place over time.

“I don't think any of us kind of went into the programming or schematic design phase with a courtyard being part of the program," she says. "It really was a result of our design approach, which is very responsive to elements of the context.”

When the idea for a courtyard came out of that process, it immediately worked for Rodriguez, who wanted to pay homage to his grandmother’s hacienda-style home in Mexico. The courtyard quickly became a pivotal part of the home, drawing light in from all sides and creating a secondary space that acts as more of a room than a yard.

“What the courtyard does as well is it transfers light all throughout the house, so we don’t have to have lights on during the day,” says Rodriguez. “It's all natural light, and that's what we wanted.”

Wanting to bring in ample light, the team used high-performance aluminum windows that minimize solar gain. According to Salehi, her team also did a comprehensive solar study at the beginning of the project and used deep roof overhangs that help manage sound as much as they help shade the house.

A Plan that Enables Privacy

An open courtyard and plenty of large windows might not seem like they lend themselves to private moments, but the home was planned to allow for moments of intimacy throughout. The courtyard’s square shape and lack of windows on the home's exterior walls enables privacy for the homeowners as well as for nearby neighbors.

The interiors were also planned to create flow from room to room while still allowing for pockets of privacy. The dining area, kitchen, and living rooms connect with one another around the courtyard, and at the rear of the home, a double-height family room faces out toward the redwood tree.

Up top, a recessed second story splits off into two wings, one for the primary suite and one for the homeowners' children. Other spaces throughout the home include a detached ADU that doubles as a home office and a hidden speakeasy just off the courtyard.

In addition to the architectural work, Salehi's studio also managed the home's interior design, applying a mix of natural colors and materials that make the home feel modern but warm at the same time.

"I think part of the success of this is that the interior materials are very architectural," says Salehi. "It's not something that was thought of after. It was very much designed congruous with the architectural process."

A Complex Roofline for a Truly Custom Feel

A unique butterfly roofline adds to the home's custom charm. Like the courtyard, function drove the initial design for the roof. Because of local zoning regulations, the home's second floor had a 1,000-square-foot cap and required a setback on the front wall. The team used these restrictions to their advantage.

"We wanted the monoslope [roof], but we also wanted the primary bedroom—which is on the other side [of the house]—to also have a nice ceiling height and a vault. So then the top level became like a butterfly," Salehi explains, adding that the inverted pitch of the roof takes on the shape of wings.

The roofline was complex, but having a collaborative team helped move the project along. Both Integrum Construction and Mahya Salehi Studio Architects had never taken on a roofline like this one and had to learn on the job.

According to Rodriguez, the challenges were worth it. "It really makes the house for me," he says.

"It's all natural light, and that's what we wanted."

SERGIO RODRIGUEZ, INTEGRUM CONSTRUCTION

PROJECT DETAILS

Location: Sunnyvale, Calif. (Silicon Valley)

Architect: Mahya Salehi Studio

Contractor: Integrum Construction

Photographer: Adam Potts

Area: 9,800 sq. ft. lot | 3,475 sq. ft. home (2,775 main house + 700 ADU)

Interior Design: Mahya Salehi Studio

Structural and Civil Engineer: PEC solutions

FREMONT, CALIF.

VIEW ONLINE →

Steep Flag Lot Shaped Every Decision in This Contemporary California Home

Rather than being held back by it, the design team behind this 4,800-square-foot home made the unusually-shaped, sloped site work for them

While there are several perks to building on a flag lot—having fewer neighbors, for one—the awkward shape can also pose a number of challenges. When designing a custom home for their clients in Fremont, Calif., architecture firm Mahya Salehi Studio ran into several of them.

From the lot's unusually long and narrow entry to its steep slope and strict local zoning requirements, the design team, along with Hayward, Calif.-based Padam Builders, faced a number of obstacles when developing the 4,800-square-foot home. But by using the site's conditions to their advantage, the project team was able to deliver the contemporary California home their clients envisioned.

“I felt like it was a challenge from the beginning," says Mahya Salehi, principal architect at her eponymous studio. "But those are really the projects we look for in our office, because that's what makes it interesting to us and ends up becoming the concept [for the project].”

A Tricky Site

Situated on a flag lot, the home is tucked away, accessed by a long, narrow driveway between two existing homes. Following the drive, the site opens to a buildable lot before sloping off toward a creek at the rear.

Rather than treating the slope as a challenge, the team incorporated the steep grade into the design. Local zoning limited structures to two stacked stories, so the design team embedded the lower level into the hillside and staggered the upper floors, gaining a third floor while still adhering to zoning requirements.

The site had its advantages too, says Salehi. One perk was not being beholden to a specific design standard. The clients had a specific contemporary aesthetic that they wanted to achieve, and without neighboring facades or a streetscape to address, there was more room to pursue this goal on its own terms.

“There wasn't this pressure of having to correspond to your immediate neighbors or the streetscape," she says. "It gave us a lot more flexibility and creativity.”

The home features a hand-raked white stucco exterior with limestone elements for texture. Black trim around windows and doors add contrast while remaining within the contemporary design aesthetic.

A Contemporary Home Filled With Light

While contemporary, the home isn't purely open concept. Moments of privacy are sprinkled into the floor plan as well. For instance, a cut-out beneath the stairwell doubles as a cozy seating area while remaining part of the main floor.

The kitchen, open to the living room, still maintains a sense of quiet and calm. A breakfast nook tucked off the kitchen provides a more intimate dining option, and warm neutrals and greens help ground the space.

“From the very first design sketches, we didn't want to do your typical kitchen... It was about making it a cabin-like tree house immersed in greenery with the large windows and the creek in the back,” explains Salehi.

Light was also factored into the design in a major way. A large window wall toward the rear anchors the main living area, and skylights bring light into interior corridors where windows weren't possible.

A Home Designed in Quarantine, Developed for the Future

The home was designed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was heavily factored into the programming. Rather than simply adding a home office, Salehi approached the home as a flexible space that should grow and change with its occupants.

Privacy was key. Each of the five bedrooms has its own private outdoor space and bathroom. Two bedrooms on the lower level are designed to be accessible for aging relatives staying for extended periods.

“It was a very strange time to be thinking about the future and what those needs are going to be,” says Salehi. “... Very early on, we were thinking about this house as this flexible, evolving, living organism that has to be able to address different circumstances and needs.”

“There wasn't this pressure of having to correspond to your immediate neighbors or the streetscape.”

MAHYA SALEHI, MAHYA SALEHI STUDIO

PROJECT DETAILS

Location: Fremont, Calif.

Contractor: Padam Builders

Interior Design: Mahya Salehi Studio

Area: 12,700-square-foot lot size | 4,800 square-foot interior space | 3,050-square-foot house footprint

Architect: Mahya Salehi Studio

Photographer: Adam Potts

CUPERTINO, CALIF.

VIEW ONLINE →

Cupertino Home Puts a Contemporary Spin on Traditional Japanese Design

Dealing with strict regulations that mandate Spanish Colonial and Mission styles, the project team behind this 1,850-square-foot custom home knew it would be a challenge to bring the client's dream of a Japanese-inspired home to life

When tasked with creating a home inspired by traditional Japanese design, Seattle-based architecture firm SHED Architecture and San Francisco-based builder Art of Construction knew they faced a challenge. According to Clayton Herbst of SHED Architecture, the site of the 1,850-square-foot custom home in Cupertino, Calif., is directly adjacent to homes mandated by zoning regulations to follow Spanish Colonial and Mission styles.

These regulations, along with a small lot, and a goal to bring forward traditional Japanese design elements suitable to the client's taste would be tricky, but the design team decided to take the project on.

“The most challenging process was the land use requirements," says Herbst. "Fortunately, we had an extremely patient, wonderful client, and so they were able to go along with us on this, fighting for what we know to be good design."

A Contemporary Exterior Injected With Japanese Flair

To meet the criteria, the project team opted for a contemporary design with hints of traditional Japanese elements sprinkled throughout. In this way, they were able to achieve their design goals while also comply with city regulations.

From the street, passersby are met with a white stucco-clad home that matches its neighbors.

But a stacked upper level reveals black shou sugi ban siding, a charred cedar cladding imported from Nakamoto Forestry in Japan.

“To synthesize with the rest of the architecture in the area, we deployed some of that stucco in those Spanish Colonial-style homes on the first floor,” says Herbst. “The other thing is zoning codes that say the second story has to be set back from the first, so it creates this wedding-cake-like form that we arrived at."

The front of the home also features a slatted wood gate and concrete landscape walls that keep the home contemporary and minimalistic while also concealing a "genkan," a transitional entryway for removing shoes before entering the main living areas of the home.

A Small Space That Feels Bright and Open

The interior features floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors that provide easy access to intimate courtyard gardens and flood the interior with sunlight.

The living-dining-kitchen spaces run parallel to the rear yard, with a covered “engawa,” which serves as a transitional sunroom, connecting the indoor and outdoor spaces.

“Fortunately, we had an extremely patient, wonderful client.”

CLAYTON HERBST, SHED ARCHITECTURE

Working with a small space, the team designed the main living and kitchen areas for maximum functionality, with plenty of storage hidden throughout. For instance, custom white oak built-ins provide extra storage, while a bench built into the back of the kitchen island provides extra seating for the dining table.

While the public areas are located on the main level, bedrooms occupy the compact upper level of the home, including the primary suite, which features a wet room with an Ofuro wood Japanese soaking tub.

A Dual-Purpose Staircase That Hides High-Performance Features

Adjacent to the genkan entry, a central skylit stairwell acts as a unique focal point for the home, but that's not all it is. With the goal of maximizing space throughout the home, the stairway cleverly hides away the home's mechanical systems.

The home exceeds net-zero energy targets through solar arrays conveniently located on the roof above the stairwell, while a mini-split heat pump, among other features, is tucked away inside the stairwell.

"You have this light-filled stairway, which has a skylight above it, and that brings light all the way down to this back hall," says Herbst. "This stairway is really the nexus for mechanical. Above the stair is where we jam-packed the heat pumps and the ERV and all the air handlers. It's this really compact nugget of utility."

Herbst says he has seen demand surge for similar high-performance features across his practice.

"People are interested in resiliency and having a home that is durable and comfortable. Net-zero, I think, is something that we're interested in. The overall concept is just creating something that's functional, and I think we certainly are encouraging most people to fully electrify their homes," he says.

PROJECT DETAILS

Location: Cupertino, Calif.
Architect: SHED Architecture
Structural Engineer: Todd Perbix
Area: 1,850 square feet
Contractor: Art of Construction
Photography: Ethan Gordon

LOS ALTOS, CALIF.

VIEW ONLINE →

A New Los Altos Home Fans Out Across a Wedge-Shaped Lot

MN Builders and Ogawa Fisher Architects shaped a new home around a difficult site, then expanded the basement during construction to accommodate a double-height workshop

Jason and Clotilde had lived for years at the end of a Los Altos, Calif., cul-de-sac and were planning a remodel when a work assignment took the family away for a time. By the time they returned, they had decided to build new instead and hire Ogawa Fisher Architects to design the house.

"Just being away from the house gave them a fresh perspective of what they wanted," says Hiromi Ogawa, founder and principal of the Palo Alto firm.

Moving was not an option, since Clotilde teaches French at a nearby school and their son's high school is within walking distance.

The site also influenced the decision to start over. The original house sat in the middle of a pie-shaped lot that's narrow on the street and wider in the back, which left little yard space and nowhere to put the pool the owners wanted.

"One of the benefits of building new is that we could put [the house] wherever we wanted, and optimize for things like sunlight and yard space," says Ogawa. "So we brought it to the front as much as possible."

The narrow property had to accommodate a three-car garage, so the architects designed the home with two wings that followed the shape of the lot. One was a garage wing and the other a bedroom wing, with a fan-shaped great room connecting the two and opening to a courtyard with a pool just beyond.

The design also addressed the afternoon heat and glare that was a problem in the old house by giving the new one deep overhangs on the south and west sides and working to save the mature birch trees that shaded the yard.

The firm specifies concrete with high fly ash content and high-performance windows on every project and, here, the shed roof over the bedroom also carries a solar array. "It's not a Passive House, but it's inspired from Passive House principles, where we're really trying to provide a very well insulated and low-energy home," Ogawa says.

Bringing the Builder in Early

As that design was taking shape, the owners wanted a sense of what costs to expect and began interviewing builders, including Oakland, Calif.-based MN Builders, a firm Ogawa Fisher had recommended after working together on earlier projects.

MN has its origins as a cabinetry shop and Rich Robb, the company's CEO, says it still shapes how the construction firm runs. Robb says the owner toured MN's shop, and he thinks the in-house millwork was one reason why the family hired the firm. "His background was in manufacturing, so I think seeing the process behind how we work was cool for him," he says.

Preconstruction ran about a year as the design was finished and permitted. "We were assembling the pricing, doing a lot of work on the sub-leveling, figuring out some of the design-build components, and dialing in the price and schedule," Robb says.

The Board-Formed Wall

The owners had asked for simple materials and as little paint as possible, which led to natural cedar ceilings and exposed concrete. Color comes from the tile and cabinetry instead. The palette, inspired by the iconic blue and orange of vintage Porsche race cars, shifts to warmer purples and pinks in other rooms.

Going into construction, a feature that captured much of the owners' attention was a two-story board-formed concrete wall that would run the length of the home and carry down into the lower level. They fell in love with the material on field trips with the architects and decided they wanted the texture as rough as possible. They even mapped the exact placement and length of each board, and the architects had rough-sawn lumber milled to size.

"It would appear random, but it was designed as a composition," says Ogawa.

That level of detail was new for MN. "It was the first time we ended up doing shop drawings for a board-formed [concrete] wall," Robb says. The team chose the concrete subcontractor carefully, knowing the result could be impacted by the weather or humidity and wouldn't be evident until the form boards ultimately came off. "You can do your best to control the outcome, but it's one of those things that can change every single time," Robb says.

Rethinking the Basement

At the same time, Jason, a designer and former Tesla engineer and car enthusiast, had been thinking about renting a workshop away from the house. But early in construction, just after the basement concrete was poured, he asked whether the team could build it under the house instead.

The original basement covered about half the home's footprint, so saying yes meant extending the basement across the full structure and digging it much deeper for higher ceilings.

The changes sent the project back through engineering, pricing, a change order, and permitting, adding months to the schedule. But Robb says they continued working on other parts of the house while the shop took shape.

Waterproofing was another concern, and the team had several waterproofing contractors review the work. "It's not a traditional eight-foot basement ceiling. At some points, they're 14,15-feet high. So you're really wanting to make sure nothing gets in there," Robb says.

Ogawa calls it "amazing" that MN Builders caught up with the workshop build by the time the overall project reached the finish stage.

The completed shop connects to the garage by a telescoping lift that allows Jason to move cars and machinery between the two levels. The shop now holds cars and motorcycles, along with wood- and metal-fabrication equipment.

Even though the shop sits below grade, a large light well brings daylight into the double-height space and the original basement opens onto a sunken courtyard of its own. “None of the basement rooms actually feel like a basement,” says Ogawa.

Robb says nothing about the house from the street prepares visitors for the shop. “When you walk into the garage and you really see the light well and you realize how big the space is down below, it's pretty fun,” he says.

An Engaged Client

Jason took time off work to help manage the build. "I think it's because he knew that it was going to set up the next phase and chapters of his life," Robb says.

He often stopped by after crews left for the day to make notes and ask questions, and he wanted to understand every system, down to how water would be moved away from the building. He and MN's site superintendent talked constantly and even kept in touch after the family moved in. "He really knew how his house operated," Robb says. "Whereas if the clients are not as involved, you often go through a period of training after that may stick or it may not."

Ogawa says many of the firm's Silicon Valley clients typically have careers in engineering and product design, which raises expectations for their homes. Jason and Clotilde's own brief was quite detailed, down to listing the model numbers of the appliances they wanted. "The flip side of that is that they are really appreciative of the craft and the expertise that people of our industry can lend to the project," Ogawa says.

She compliments MN with delivering the precision those clients expect.

"Basements in general are hard, and then having to do two basements in different phases must have been extremely complicated, but they made it look easy," she says.

MN builds one or two ground-up homes a year, and most of its work is renovation, often for clients who have owned their land or home for years. Asked what the firm took from this project, Robb points to the basement. "That was a highlight that we'd like to do more of," he says.

"None of the basement rooms actually feel like a basement."

HIROMI OGAWA, OGAWA FISHER ARCHITECTS

PROJECT DETAILS

Location: Los Altos, Calif.

Completion: 2024

Architect: Ogawa Fisher Architects, Palo Alto, Calif.

MEP Engineer: Monterey Energy Group

Civil Engineer: Precision Engineering

Products: Centor multifold doors with integrated screens; Loewen Douglas fir and metal-clad windows; Fleetwood aluminum windows and doors

Size: 7,600 sq. ft.

Builder: MN Builders, Oakland, Calif.

Structural Engineer: BKG Structural Engineers

Geotechnical Engineer: Romig Engineers

Photography: Joe Fletcher

WORKING WITH THE TECH CLIENT

CLIENT EXPERIENCE

VIEW ONLINE →

Tech Workers Don't Want the Homes You'd Think

They'll read every page of your construction documents, then ask for a house with no visible tech. What they want behind the walls is another story

Tech-industry homebuyers building their dream homes today are not your average clients.

"Our construction document sets can be 160 pages long, [and] most of our clients don't want to read through that," says David Stone of Tim Barber Architects in Beverly Hills, Calif. "But our tech clients have always asked for the entire set. They read every line and they come back to us with questions."

Who are these well-read clients, what's it like working with them, and what do they want in a home?

On the surface, they want a home that reads as "dumb." Behind the scenes, they want genius. Understanding that tension, and the underlying desires driving it, is the key to working with them successfully.

The tech client is seeking a lifestyle upgrade, or an escape

This person is typically someone in their mid-30s to early 40s, established in their career and clear on their priorities, building their next home as a deliberate step up, a lifestyle upgrade.

“We're seeing a much younger demographic with tech clients,” says Mahya Salehi of the California Bay area-based architecture and interior design firm Mahya Salehi Studio. “There’s definitely a wealth in earlier years than we see with other client types like doctors and lawyers. What we're really seeing is people relocating within the same community, but into a better neighborhood or a house with more square footage and a backyard.”

The household often comes with an extended support network. “We see a lot of immigrant community in the tech sector where parents will visit for months at a time,” Salehi says. “So we’re seeing a lot of multi-generational living and also au pairs and nannies—all the support systems that come with being busy, successful individuals.”

Some tech clients are building away from the city entirely, says Todd Smith of architecture firm Syndicate Smith in Leavenworth, Wash. “It's mostly those folks that are deep into it,” he says, referencing to the intensity of their careers. “That escape is necessary. They’re thinking about what is next after they complete their journey in the tech industry.”

The tech client is eager and involved

As the bridge between high-level strategy and technical implementation in their companies, tech executives need both an eye for detail and a mind for systems. Bringing that combination into the design space, you get a client who is involved in every aspect of creating their dream home.

"It does require a different level of interaction than your average client. They want to know all of the details of the house versus just wanting to know the basic look," says Stone. "They engage with us on the shapes, textures, colors, the hardware, the feel, and comfort of the home to a very interactive degree. We love working with them because of that."

These clients are eagerly using all the tools they're given.

"Having BIMx models that they can use to explore their project on a regular basis is something that our firm does for all of our clients," says Esther Alva of the Los Angeles-based architecture and landscape architecture firm KAA Design. "But I think our tech clients enjoy it more. They really get in there. They look at the details, they think about the underlying systems of the home and how they are going to fold into the design. They want to know how everything's coming together."

These clients bring tech-industry norms to the design world

"We sense a best-practice level of communication with all of these clients," notes Smith. "They talk about expectations, actionability, and what comes next. It's very much treated like project management from their end."

Tech clients aren't shy about giving feedback, asking questions, or making requests. They bring a high level of scrutiny to the process, but with a collaborative attitude. "Sometimes it comes across as way too assertive, but I think it's really great," Smith says. "It's very clear, succinct, and solution-oriented."

"To someone who has not worked with this industry, it could feel a little [like] micromanaging," Salehi says. "But you just need to be open and meet people where they are."

"It's the distinction between a tricked-out kind of home and just a home that's genuinely intelligent."

ESTHER ALVA, KAA DESIGN

Designing for tech client means adding structure to the process

Since tech clients tend to be more analytical, they appreciate a linear, well-structured process, says Brett Moyer of Richard Beard Architects in San Francisco. “How we respond to that is to show them a roadmap of our design meetings so they can see what we're going to present and when.”

It’s a fundamentally poetic thing to create a home for yourself, Moyer adds, but that’s not incompatible with good project management. “I don’t see that as exclusive to having a well-run project with accurate project management notes that reflect the decisions that are made,” he says, “providing them with pricing information from the contractor early and often.”

Tech clients are opting out of smart home technology

Given their profession, you might assume these clients would want the smartest home in the neighborhood. But that’s not necessarily true.

“Interestingly enough, our clients in the tech industry specifically ask to not have a smart home. They want something that's very simple and easy for them to live in,” Stone shares.

Clients who deal with tech all day long don’t want to come home and log into an app to change the lights. They don’t want to troubleshoot a whole-house sound system. A reliable dimmer switch on the wall and a simple Bluetooth speaker will do.

“They deal with tech every day. Some of them just want a really dumb house,” Salehi says.

These clients are also acutely aware of how quickly technology changes. Something that was all the rage ten years ago might be obsolete now—like built in USB ports, Salehi notes. “They don't really see the logic in building some system into their house that might be obsolete in a few years.”

But this doesn’t mean they reject technology for their homes altogether.

Tech clients want state-of-the-art building systems

“We do a lot of tours when our clients are picking a contractor, and our tech clients seem to love seeing the mechanical room,” says Moyer. “It’s a bit like walking into a chip factory. They’re usually very clean, very organized. They’re bigger than you would ever guess; they take over whole thirds or quarters of a basement.”

These mechanical rooms might include backup energy systems, backup Wi-Fi, systems that coordinate fresh air with cooling, and other important infrastructure the homeowner never has to think about.

“I think our tech clients have a keen interest in making sure those building systems are state of the art,” Moyer says. “When it comes to how the homes operate, they seem to be leaning in hard to the technology.”

Some automations do appeal, like preset temperatures and humidity stats. Not smart home features, exactly, just background systems that lighten the homeowner’s mental load. “They’re being smart—no pun intended—about what makes sense and what would actually be functional.”

“They want to make sure they’re investing in the right systems,” Alva adds. “It’s the distinction between a tricked-out kind of home and just a home that’s genuinely intelligent.”

For the tech client, it’s about prioritizing what matters

A home that’s smart behind the scenes but simple to live in makes sense for this client. They need the infrastructure and technology that let them work and move through daily life comfortably, and a space that supports the rest.

“If you can create the most comfortable shelter but the most immersive experience into the outside, if you can sit in the space and just ponder and dream, it's really kind of a dry erase board for your soul,” Smith says.

“It’s interesting to me that the more tech is integrated into our lives, there is a counterpoint to that, where our clients seem to be a lot more interested in things that are more real,” Moyer says. “We’re living in a world where AI can do so many things, and probably everyone’s using it, yet they seem to get the most excited talking about stone and wood or views from their window, and designing a home for reading or cooking or entertaining. They seem to be retreating a little into a more authentic, meaningful home life."

BUSINESS

VIEW ONLINE →

High-Investment, High-Touch: The Rise of Construction Concierges

Project managers are evolving into client experience specialists as service expectations rise

Client expectations are shaped by a world of constant updates and easy access to information, and custom builders are adapting and elevating their service to match the scale of their client's investments.

"It's become a much more hands-on approach—with homeowners being involved in construction and needing more and more information—that requires somebody available to manage the client's expectations all through the project," says Melissa Kennedy, president of Meadowlark Design+Build in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Kennedy says that construction is now viewed like other service industries.

"The rest of the world sets our expectations," she says. "[Construction] is high investment, high touch. You're touching something that is most people's greatest asset, and they want to know what's going on."

To meet that demand, some builders are redefining project management roles into “construction concierge” or “client experience” services that are focused on people as much as on execution.

A construction concierge doesn’t just manage the build; they guide the client through it, anticipating needs, managing expectations, and prioritizing a smooth experience throughout the process.

The Evolution of a Role

Is a construction concierge just a rebranded project manager, or is this a whole new role?

“I think it’s an evolution of a role in developing what soft skills are needed for a project manager,” says Kennedy. A concierge still needs construction knowledge, experience, and fluency, “but they also have to possess these beautiful soft skills that help guide the homeowner, soften the experience, and really have empathy for the homeowner’s experience and prioritize it through construction.”

Beyond the soft skills Kennedy describes, builders are also redefining the breadth of what this type of project oversight means.

Julian Barak, owner of Vesta Builders in San Diego, sees the construction concierge as a “serious upgrade” that requires maintaining a holistic view: predicting problems, reviewing options, and giving advice through the process.

Colin Corbo of Corbo Associates in Southbury, Conn., takes this even further, describing a role that includes everything from helping clients find and evaluate property to coordinating with all the required design professionals, and working through the permitting process—every step from start to finish.

A construction concierge has to take all their knowledge and experience and apply it directly to the client’s budget, lifestyle, and family needs in order to get the client exactly what they want, Corbo explains.

For many builders, the construction concierge role is filled by team members who maintain a project manager job title, while some smaller companies may see the owner or VP serving as concierge.

“Our homes are very personal things. There is no one-size-fits-all, for sure.”

COLIN CORBO, CORBO ASSOCIATES

Soft Skills in Construction

But what does it actually take to develop those ‘beautiful soft skills’ Kennedy mentioned? For her, the answer came from an unexpected client conversation.

In 2017, she attended a project closeout meeting where a client calmly and clearly told her the firm needed to hire more female project managers. When Kennedy asked what she meant, the client responded, “This is a job that requires empathy. It is hard for clients who live through construction.”

She carried that insight with her for a long time. “Not necessarily that it had to be women managing projects,” Kennedy says, “but that the empathy required for homeowners to live through construction is high.”

When stepping into a construction management role, she had opportunities to hire with soft skills in mind. “I added [more] female project managers on staff, but, more definitively, we changed the roles and responsibilities of what a project manager at Meadowlark needed to be able to do.”

The company decided the project manager would focus on managing the client and their experience, while the site superintendent handles onsite trade coordination and work execution.

A Concierge Success Story

Meadowlark’s approach includes set walk-throughs on site, weekly project emails, a shared Google calendar, and—most importantly—a dedicated concierge as the client’s primary point of contact.

To set each project up for success, the company carefully pairs clients and concierges by personality. “It can be a really lovely collaborative relationship when the dynamics of the people work well together, and it can be a lot more challenging when they don’t,” Kennedy says.

Meadowlark has also developed internal processes to support this service model. “We say we’re relentlessly reliable,” Kennedy explains. “We will not go over. We will always show up. We will be there.”

The company concierge guides clients from the very start of the process through design, pre-construction, construction, and then through their warranty process.

This approach has resulted in an 85% client return and referral rate, Kennedy says.

Concierge as a Third-Party Service

Some industry professionals are offering construction concierge as a third-party service.

Rather than builders adding this role internally, there are designers stepping in to fill the gap. Elizabeth Lord-Levitt, principal designer at Elizabeth P. Lord Residential Design LLC in Denver, works to ensure that her clients feel heard and that their investments are protected.

“A lot of clients are novices. They want to build a new home, but they just don’t know who to trust,” Lord-Levitt says. “This is their biggest investment, and so they want to make sure it’s done right.”

Lord-Levitt walks clients through the design/build process, reviewing bids and floor plans and working collaboratively with contractors, architects, and interior designers.

“I’m not there to boss people around as a construction concierge,” Lord-Levitt adds. She might need to hold people accountable, when necessary, she explains, but she’s also there to take work off the builder’s plate by holding the client’s hands through the process.

The Future of the Construction Concierge

This growing emphasis on client experience raises questions about where the industry is heading.

For Corbo, the answer is clear: “Our homes are very personal things. There is no one-size-fits-all, for sure. So, I don’t think it’s a service that’s going away anytime soon, if ever.”

Barak agrees, noting that, once customers experience this level of service, “it’s hard to go back.” He believes builders who don’t adapt will get left behind as concierge-level service becomes the expected standard.

Kennedy sees the shift as beneficial for the entire industry. “If we really just accept this development in the project manager role,” she says, “it will elevate construction experiences for everybody and raise the bar to get into construction, giving people an overall better experience.”

Ultimately, the rise of the construction concierge reflects a simple truth: even in an industry focused on building structures, the human experience remains paramount.

Custom Builder

More Projects Like These

Custom Builder’s case studies show how builders and architects work through difficult sites, zoning limits and demanding clients on real projects. Browse them at custombuilderonline.com.

READ MORE CASE STUDIES →

Get Custom Builder Weekly

Our newsletter brings new projects, design details, and business reporting to custom builders and their design partners every Wednesday.

SIGN UP FOR CUSTOM BUILDER WEEKLY →