



The Smart-Stell house is a one-level, 2400-square-foot Modernist home built in Durham's Parkwood community by Tonic Construction.

BY KIM WEISS
George Smart and his wife, Eleanor Stell, wanted a new house, but not a new neighborhood. They loved the quiet, established area of Parkwood in Durham, where they'd lived since 1995.
One day, on one of their walks, they found a 40-year-old house for sale that



From the street, the house's form is low, quiet, horizontal and private, with the only real opening toward the street at the front door.

was beyond repair. Yet this nondescript house sat on a lot with a southeast exposure toward a small, sparkling lake. This would be the perfect location for their new home, and they turned to a Raleigh design-build firm, Tonic Design + Tonic Construction, to make it happen.
The Smart-Stell house is a one-level, 2400-square-foot Modernist home — a unique structure in a neighborhood dominated by similarly sized, ranch-style homes. As a result, the design had to address two key site issues: the context of the existing neighborhood and the landscape of the lake. "We expected the neighbors to be concerned with the Modernist design," says Smart, "but that did not come up. Their main worry was scale. No one wanted a McMansion in the neighborhood." Smart knew a thing or two about modern. In 2007 he founded North Carolina Modernist Houses (formerly Triangle Modernist Houses), a nonprofit dedicated to the documentation, preservation and promotion of Modernist houses in the state. Only about 1 of 400 houses in the Triangle can be considered Modernist.
From the street, the house's form is low, quiet, horizontal and private, with

SMART MOVES

Sellers should do the prep work

BY ELLEN JAMES MARTIN
UNIVERSAL UCLICK
After spending more than two decades selling RVs, a sales manager in his early 60s wants to retire, buy a big motorhome and take the cross-country trip of a lifetime. To make that dream possible, he must first sell his suburban house — a plan he hopes to accomplish this spring.
But like most would-be home sellers, the RV salesman has lots of prep work to do, says Sid Davis, the real estate broker representing him. He must de-clutter, clean carpets, paint and arrange for a myriad of small repairs.
"It's always an uphill battle making a house market worthy, especially if you've lived there a long time and have lots of junk," says Davis, author of "Home Makeovers that Sell" and other books on real estate.
Of course, not all sellers have the luxury of ample lead time. But he says sellers who do have sufficient time should take full advantage.
"When you have so much money at stake, why risk razor-thin timing? Remember, too, that selling a house in "as is" condition puts you at a tremendous disadvantage," Davis says.
So long as the economic recovery shows sustained strength, Davis predicts that this year's spring housing market should remain a positive one for sellers in many areas. Still, he says those who prepare now to jump-start an early spring sale will probably fare better than those who delay.
Here are a few pointers:
■ Engage a listing agent as early as possible. "Ideally, you'll start prepping your property at least three months before you expect to list," Davis says.
Once you know you're definitely going to move, he says it's prudent to begin interviewing prospective listing agents and then to promptly select one to represent you.
"People who have enough time to get all their ducks in a row and use it wisely have a huge advantage over those who start late," Davis says.
One reason to start early is to give your listing agent enough time to help you strategize on the best steps to maximize your sale, whether these involve replacing a worn kitchen floor or rehabbing a deck. Also, the agent can exercise more care in selecting the right listing date.
"People who try to line up contractors to

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PARKWOOD
CONTINUED FROM 8D

the only real opening toward the street at the front door. Because this house would be a dramatic departure from others in the neighborhood, Tonic’s designers Katherine Hogan and Vincent Petrarca sited it deeply into the property, closer to the lake than the street. Square concrete pads lead from the driveway to the front porch and a series of decorative brick walls.

As private as the front is, the house completely opens up to its surroundings at the back, where floor-to-ceiling windows, sliding glass doors, and a wooden deck that spans the entire rear elevation provide constant views and access to Parkwood Lake. This maximizes the interior’s connection to the outdoors without sacrificing the homeowners’ privacy. Says Stell, “we really got two homes in one, a city house with a vacation house location.”

As for interior spaces, the design was kept small but flexible: an entrance foyer; an open living/dining/kitchen space

suitable for entertaining, especially with access to the deck from this space; a master bedroom suite with two separate bathrooms and walk-in closets; two generous office spaces; a guest room and additional bath when the couple’s grown children come to visit and a spacious two-car garage that accommodates two cars with plenty of room left over for storage space. Maple hardwood floors throughout add an element of visual warmth to the predominately white interior.

As both the designer and contractor for this project, Tonic’s challenge was to maximize the view of the lake while providing the homeowners with an energy-efficient, comfortable house. The solution came in the form of a hockey stick-shaped roof structure fabricated of wood beams and steel plate. This composite structure, designed with the help of the North Carolina Solar Center, supports an IPE pipe trellis. The roof’s form and composition block the sun’s high, harsh rays in the summer yet allow the low winter sun to penetrate and warm the interior. A band of

clerestory windows above the main living space, facing the street, allows more natural light to penetrate the interior and creates a glow above the horizontal structure at night. “The house is modest in size,” says Smart, but the open design allows for great entertaining.” We’ve had as many as 160 people in an evening.”

To meet the homeowners’ construction budget, Tonic specified standard, off-the-shelf materials reinterpreted in inventive ways, such as the “pin stripe” siding that creates horizontal detailing on the street-facing façade and brings to mind a gray, pin-striped suit, in contrast, the rear elevation brings to mind a casual vacation cottage overlooking a lake. The Smart-Stell house won a 2010 Merit Award from AIA North Carolina and a 2012 Honor Award from the AIA Triangle.

Knock Knock visits some of the Triangle’s most unique residential architecture, powered by the archives of preservation nonprofit North Carolina Modernist Houses, ncmodernist.org.



Homeowner George Smart stands on the expansive deck beyond the home’s living area with floor-to-ceiling glass that allows unobstructed views of the sparkling lake at Parkwood in Durham.

SMART MOVES
CONTINUED FROM 8D

movesqueeze in their job at the last minute are more vulnerable to exploitation and can’t be as picky about who they hire,” Davis says.

■ Request data on selling times. Suppose you’re an IT specialist for a national consulting firm who’s accepted a promotion in a faraway state. You have seven months to relocate. How can you estimate the time needed to go from list to sale?

Dorcas Helfant, a former president of the National Association of Realtors (www.realtor.org) recommends you ask your agent for statistics on the average selling times for homes in your neighborhood.

“Keep in mind that the only numbers that are relevant are those for your own community. National statistics don’t matter,” Helfant says.

Take these local numbers, known as “days on market,” and chart them over a six-month period.

“If your market is cooler than before, you’ll want to give yourself at least one extra month beyond the average selling time to ensure a smooth transition,” Helfant says.

■ Begin your packing process early.

In his experience, Davis says a majority of home sellers don’t see the point of packing early for their move.

“Let’s face it, we humans usually wait until the last inning to mobilize. We’re a deadline-oriented species,” he says.

Besides painting and repairs, nearly all sellers need to go through an exhaustive clearing-out process to ensure their property doesn’t seem crowded. Your first step, Davis says, should be to remove any excess furnishings, like a large recliner or an oversized china cabinet. Then box up smaller items and position them neatly in your garage or a rented storage unit.

“It’s very easy to underestimate how long it takes to go through all your personal things ... trust me, you won’t miss all that extra stuff you’ve packed away,” Davis says.

■ Give yourself extra selling time when moving to a brand-new home.

These days it’s uncommon for a builder of new homes to sign a sales contract with a prospective

buyer that’s conditional on the sale of the buyer’s property. This is called a “contingent contract.”

“If the builder has a hot subdivision, he doesn’t want to mess with contingent buyers,” Davis says.

Consequently, those who seek to buy a place in a popular new subdivision take the gamble that they’ll sell their current property before the builder has completed the new one. But that’s better than the alternative.

“Buyers who don’t have a contingent contract and can’t afford to carry two homes at once are putting themselves in financial jeopardy. If they can’t go forward with the new home purchase in a timely way, they could both forfeit their deposit and lose their dream home,” Davis says.

Because it can take months to

construct a house, some new-home buyers wait longer than they should before trying to sell their current property, according to Davis.

“The sales contract may let the builder finish construction late but give you little grace time to get your old place sold,” he says.

Many listing agents urge sellers who intend to move to a brand-new home to be extra cautious in estimating how long they’ll need to sell. It’s better to be ready to move early, they insist.

“Granted, if you sell earlier than expected you might have to take a short-term rental or move in with family temporarily. But the hassles of interim housing are a lot better than the disappointment of surrendering your chance for a wonderful new house,” Davis says.

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