

# More work, less space

## Copeland sees demand rise for design-build work for smaller houses

Treva Lind

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-- Staff photo by Treva Lind

Copeland Architecture's Austin Dickey, Bob Britton, and Jeff Fountain say the firm currently is architect for about 15 home projects.

Copeland Architecture & Construction Inc., of Spokane, has seen an uptick this year in custom home design and building projects, after riding out three years of slow residential construction activity, during which it handled more commercial design work.

The company's partners also say that for its residential design projects in 2012, more of them than usual are for homes just under 2,000 square feet of floor space—as a departure from typically a range of between 2,000 square feet and 4,000 square feet for a custom home. Additionally, many of its current clients are seeking high-efficiency energy or water systems as well.

"We do a lot of sustainable-living homes; it's a niche we have of green building and green design," says Jeff Fountain, a co-owner and company vice president. "We have a fair amount of homes that are under 2,000 square feet."

He adds, "The trend right now, based on our workload, is for smaller homes."

Clients have different reasons for requesting more compact residences, he says, ranging from a desire for efficient, yet comfortable smaller spaces that save money on energy costs to wanting less home to maintain. Copeland also has some residential remodel projects as well, which make up about a third of its current workload, Fountain says.

It currently is the architect for about 15 home projects, a majority of which are in the design phase. The company has three home-construction projects under way.

Copeland specializes in custom design-build residential projects and also provides commercial design services for office, retail, and multifamily residential projects. It occupies an 1,800-square-foot space on the fifth floor of the Schade Towers building, at 528 E. Spokane Falls Blvd.

Fountain, Bob Britton, and Austin Dickey are the company's three owners and its only employees currently, down from 10 employees in 2008.

However, Fountain says the company this year is seeing a significant jump in revenues, and Britton says he hopes to add personnel as the company lands more jobs.

"This year, we're double what we were in 2011," Fountain says about revenues. "Both design and construction are up in 2012."

Britton adds, "I hope to add someone in the construction management arena as we get more jobs. We'd like to add personnel. We're having a fine last half of 2012."

Fountain and Britton completed a three-year buyout of the company in 2008 from founder and architect Gerry Copeland, who started it here as Copeland Design & Construction in the mid-1980s. After the sale, Copeland continued to work part time at the company until his death in 2010.

Dickey joined the company in 2007 and oversees the commercial design work. Britton, who has worked at Copeland since 1997, is company president. He also is construction manager for home construction projects. Britton says the company hires subcontractors for its residential construction work, and he wears many hats, from construction manager to heavy-equipment operator as needed.

Fountain, who joined the company in 2004 and manages the residential-design projects, says that Copeland during the early years of the company did a small amount of commercial work, but that the design-build work for custom homes was its primary focus.

The company started seeking more commercial design work beginning around 2007, Fountain adds, when Dickey came on board. Dickey previously spent nine years at Spokane-based ALSC Architects PS, where he was involved in commercial-design work.

The diversification toward more commercial work paid off, Fountain says.

"It helped us with where the economy went, because residential projects went down, and by 2009, we had some decent commercial business," he says. "It's definitely moved back over to residential, which is over 90 percent of our workload right now."

While commercial work has slowed late this year, Fountain says the company recently has completed some sizable projects. They include designs for an 11,000-square-foot, two-story retail and office structure in Colville, a Cheney-area veterinary clinic, and exterior renovation work for Second Harvest Food Bank of the Inland Northwest's main warehouse facility.

In many cases, Copeland wins the construction jobs to build the residential projects that it designs, but since it contracts architectural and construction projects separately, that doesn't always happen. For example, Copeland currently is handling the construction of a home here that a Seattle architect designed.

Dickey says that the pickup in residential construction this year is a definite positive, since the business's overall revenues normally rely on significant residential construction income. He adds, "Construction is a decent percentage of our revenue, and 2010 and 2011 were really slow construction years for us. I know it also was for everyone."

Additionally, the company recently completed design work for the living units in a Habitat for Humanity-Spokane housing project in Deer Park. The nonprofit bought 20 acres of land there in 2008 and is slowly building the first few units among 58 total duplexes in a multiphase development. Fountain says the company offers its architectural services to Habitat for a reduced rate.

While Copeland in recent years has designed homes for lake properties, Fountain says that market also has changed.

"The lake market has changed for large secondary homes," he says. "The ones we do now are pretty modest in comparison, but most of what we do are primary homes."

Overall, the owners say that they're seeing more requests from homeowners to include energy and water efficiencies in designs. This includes a passive solar design, which involves such steps as having the roof overhang set to allow in the light of the low arcing winter sun to help warm the house, and keep out the light of the high arcing summer sun, as well as the efficient placement of windows.

"The green movement is very strong right now," Britton says. "There's a lot out there for homeowners."

More customers also are seeking design and installation of geothermal heat pump systems that include piping typically about six feet underground to take advantage of fairly constant temperatures at that level, Britton says.

A geothermal heat pump system replaces traditional furnace or heat-pump systems and consists of a series of underground pipes, a pump to pass liquid through the pipes, and a heat-exchange system. The system is designed to provide warmth from

the underground pipes in the winter and to help cool the home in the summer.

The company hopes to be the contractor this spring for some of the residential projects it's designing, Britton adds. As for potential commercial projects in the pipeline, Dickey says he is working on one small project and has at least a couple of leads to pursue.

"We're small enough that a couple of projects can be a big part of our portfolio," he adds.



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