

“It’s an iterative process ... [As a luxury builder], you’re really trying to respond to what dreams they want to create for their living space. It’s a very labour-intensive process but a very exciting process to see that evolve. — *Bruce Rudichuk*, president, Intracorp Projects



With its wraparound porch, this stately home could very well be in the Southern U.S. It’s actually part of the Estates of Olde Meadowvale in Mississauga by luxury low-rise builder, Hush.

BY SUZANNE WINTROB

It will be at least another year before Ellis Rodwell and Abena Perryman move into their new 3,200-square-foot, \$1-million-plus house in Hush Communities’ Estates of Olde Meadowvale in Mississauga. But it is worth the wait because they know their dream home will be striking, spacious and reflect their lifestyle.

Mr. Rodwell is a banker and Ms. Perryman is a consultant and they both commute by GO Train every day to their jobs in downtown Toronto. They have a six-year-old daughter attending a Montessori school and a three-year-old son who will likely go there when the family moves. Their current four-bedroom home in a nearby subdivision has been feeling cramped lately, particularly the small bedrooms and the single sink in the couple’s ensuite that proves tough to share on rushed weekday mornings.

Last January their search for a new home began. The recession was in full swing but Mr. Rodwell and Ms. Perryman were determined to move, so they studied the housing market, pondered their assets and job security, and decided to take the leap. But they did not want to end up in another cookie-cutter house in a subdivision. This time they wanted large rooms, exquisite finishes and an intimate setting.

Soon the couple tumbled upon Hush Inc., a three-year-old company whose owners have 35 years of experience building high-end custom homes, subdivisions and condominiums in the Greater Toronto Area. Hush caters to luxury low-rise homebuyers like Mr. Rodwell and Ms. Perryman, with lifestyle and design coaches, high-end finishes and Sub-Zero appliances always offered as standard. Everything about Hush is meant to reflect a “best-in-class experience,” says president Naheel Suleman, right down to the company’s moniker that was specifically chosen to conjure up feelings of peace and serenity.

“Hush is the epitome of what we were looking for — comfort and a bit of luxury intertwined,” says Ms. Perryman, who was swayed by the home’s French Chateau-style facade and the quiet cul-de-sac.

That pretty well sums up luxury low-rise living in the Greater Toronto Area. Not one-off custom homes, but rather subdivisions — or “communities” as builders prefer to call them — that boast sizeable two- or three-storey “estate homes” with high ceilings, large windows, and lavish finishes such as hardwood, granite and marble adorning

just about every room. Lots are large and surrounded by greenery including lush landscaped backyards and neighbouring golf courses, parks and nature trails. Winding roads and gathering spots add to the village-like ambience.

While those buying upscale high-rise condos are generally empty nesters or yuppies climbing the corporate ladder, luxury low-rise attracts mainly young families looking to spend their hard-earned cash on living large. They are paying anywhere from \$1-million to \$2.5-million on their dream home, with many developers helping them customize the home to make it a perfect fit.

“These people are at a point in their careers when they can pamper themselves,” says Patrick O’Hanlon, president of Kylemore Communities, which has been building luxury homes near Markham’s Angus Glen Golf Course for 13 years. “They all want the same thing, and they want an address that they feel can appreciate over time. They want a community that’s more suitable to their lifestyle.”

By all accounts, it is the atmosphere that seems to be what drives people away from the custom homes of the city to the big, beautiful homes of the suburbs. Builders such as Hush, Kylemore and Intracorp are responding and business is booming again after a difficult six months.

Kylemore is on its fourth luxury low-rise project. As Mr. O’Hanlon explains, back in the mid-1990s, high-tech companies began moving to Markham but there were few upscale homes available nearby to house their executives. Kylemore saw an opportunity and was soon carving out lots on the edge of Angus Glen. In 2001, a collection of spacious homes at Angus Glen East Village — priced between \$1.5-million and \$2-million — sold out overnight, says Mr. O’Hanlon, with \$1-million bungalows doing the same a short time later.

Now Kylemore is working on 1,000 homes at Angus Glen West Village. Some homes are on 50-ft. lots, with Mr. O’Hanlon promising that smaller \$1-million homes will have the same luxurious features as the \$2-million homes. There is also a custom line of 70- to 100-ft. lots, similarly priced, where purchasers can either work with Kylemore’s architect and designer to create the exterior and interior of their home or select a lot and customize an existing detached floorplan.

“In the 905 area there are not a lot of luxury communities from a low-rise nature, which makes it more of a risk for us to do that,” he says. “But

down to earth

These exceptional low-rises are big on luxury and liveability — and they can be customized to suit your family’s needs



Kylemore offers luxury in the 905, top, while the Bungalows of Kilgour Estate by Daniels, above, bridge city and country on a verdant site at Bayview and Eglinton avenues.

it also reaps the rewards of that type of clientele.”

Mr. Suleman of Hush says people seeking their dream home have traditionally had but two options. There is the run-of-the-mill subdivision, where \$300,000 homes sit beside \$800,000 homes and “you’re forcing yourself into luxury in a product that is really not meant to be.” Or there is the custom home that involves zoning issues, planners and architects, all of which can be onerous and expensive for those not used to the process.

That is why Hush’s “sweet spot,” as Mr. Suleman calls it, is building small groups of luxury homes and offering top-notch service. Even oft-neglected rooms get special treatment, with shelving and finished floors in the furnace room and custom-designed garages. The Hush Methodology offers discerning buyers access to lifestyle, financial and interior design specialists, a website to watch construction progress, inspections, move-in help and more. Hush also offers special packages for landscaping and snow shovelling, holiday-lights installation and vacation security.

Mr. Suleman says Hush has deliberately chosen to build small groups of homes so they can be managed from beginning to end. Olde Meadowvale, for instance, consists of just 26 homes ranging from \$850,000 to \$1.9-million, while Hush’s two Oakville enclaves total 27 homes from \$1.295-million to more than \$2-million. Occupancy begins next summer.

Yet like any expensive deal, luxury takes time and buyers have to be prepared to wait. Don Pugh, vice-president of The Daniels Corp., says it takes about six months to complete a home at the company’s The Bungalows of Kilgour Estate in mid-town Toronto. That is because everything is “meticulously finished and offers an exceptional level of quality,” he says. But it seems customers are willing to wait to ensure the end result is just right.

Daniels is responsible for myriad high-rise condos in Toronto, geared primarily at first-time buyers and those looking to downsize. The Bungalows, though, is aimed at well-heeled empty nesters “who want all the benefits of a single-detached home in a great area with all the benefits of living in an elite condominium building.”

The Bungalows is Daniels’ only low-rise project on the go right now, but that suits Mr. Pugh just fine because he and his team get a real kick out of building luxury low-rise.

“The team has a lot of fun doing communities like this,” he says. “It gives us a chance to expand our horizons. You’re not

constrained by the same things you are in other communities where it’s all about speed and efficiency. We can actually take some time and design a beautiful residence, take our time picking fixtures that work in the environment because it’s a sophisticated clientele.”

Of course, it hasn’t been easy for luxury developers lately given the economic downturn. Add that to the long sales cycle, and it is no wonder they felt pressured during the past six months.

“We died between October and March to the point where we were going, ‘Oh my gosh, what are we going to do?’” recalls Mr. O’Hanlon. “While resales weren’t moving, we weren’t moving. Nobody was moving into our homes. It goes back to the word ‘confidence.’ There has to be a confidence in the economy, in the job market, in investments to have a luxury market. If the confidence isn’t there, the luxury market is the first to go.”

Bruce Rudichuk, president and CEO of Intracorp Projects in Markham, concurs.

“[A luxury home] is a discretionary purchase and people are evaluating all of their options,” says Mr. Rudichuk. “We’ve had to be aggressive in working with our purchasers. One of the differences here versus a typical subdivision is these are dream homes that people are aspiring to so there’s a lot of work that goes into working with a purchaser, from the first time they visit us to ultimately buying a home. Some of it requires extensive redesign and customization. It’s a different process than what a first-time buyer arrangement would be.”

Intracorp will soon start construction on The Meadows in the Glen, comprising 91 estate homes on half- to one-acre lots in the village of Glen Williams near Georgetown. The grand heritage bungalows range from 2,000 to 3,855 sq. ft., while the four- and five-bedroom two-storeys range from 2,615 to 4,615 sq. ft. Prices range from \$850,000 to \$1.2-million with occupancy beginning next summer.

Now that the economy is rebounding and the real estate market is back in full swing, developers of luxury low-rise are relieved. Summer sales were amazing, they say, and they are excited for 2010.

“It’s an interactive process where you’re building a relationship with the purchaser to create what they want,” says Mr. Rudichuk. “You’re really trying to respond to what dreams they want to create for their living space. It’s very labour-intensive but a very exciting process to see that evolve.”