

Arizona
Foothills

custom homes



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ULTIMATE
RESOURCE

FOR BUILDING THE HOME
OF YOUR DREAMS



A LOT TO LOVE

BY CHRIS CONNOLLY / PHOTOGRAPHED BY JACKIE MERCANDETTI

THE PERFECT PLOT OF LAND IS THE ONLY FOUNDATION ON WHICH TO BUILD THE HOME OF YOUR DREAMS.

There's good news and bad news when it comes to finding the ideal lot for your custom home. The good news is, one way or another, you're going to get "a lot" for your money. (Ba-dum-dum.) The bad news is that this is a serious undertaking, one where corners should not be cut. When you decide to invest the time and money (not to mention the blood, sweat and tears) it'll take to build your perfect palace, you'd be foolish to overlook the land upon which it will rest. This means a ton of research and soul searching lies ahead of you before you can steal that "a lot for your money" joke to use at your closing.

Even though you've got your work cut out for you in the next few months (or years), finding a piece of the planet you want to build on needn't be an unpleasant experience. In fact, if you think of it as the shopping spree of a lifetime, you might even enjoy the process.

"To me, shopping [for a lot] is always fun," says architect Gustad Irani of Organic Design Workshop in Scottsdale. "Especially if you remember that nature is diverse. You shouldn't think of this as 'just a piece of dirt.' Take some time. Visit the place. Take a notebook and draw some sketches. Figure out where north, south, east and west are. All dirt is not the same. Think beyond the dirt."

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Unless you're one of those lucky folks who drove past the plot of your dreams just as some guy who owed a bunch of money to the mob and had to flee the country was hammering a "For Sale" sign into the front lawn, you probably want to think neighborhood before you think street address. Terry Ray, of Prudential Arizona Properties, considers this the most enjoyable part of the process.

"I find it very exciting to help a client look for a dream location," Ray says. "This is the part where anything is possible. You can imagine yourself swimming, biking, running or playing golf. The fun part is exploring the possibilities."

AGENT OF GOOD

After you've picked out an area, Ray suggests hooking up with a real estate agent who knows the neighborhood. "It's important to connect with a realtor who knows the guidelines of your target community," Ray advises. "This can really simplify the process. Trying to research those guidelines on your own can be very complicated."

So what obstacles can your agent point out that you might not detect for yourself? Well, for one thing, if your would-be neighbors live in mile after mile of gorgeous ranch houses, they, and more important their homeowners' association, may not look kindly

LAY OF THE LAND: *Lots With Character can translate into a visually interesting finished product; however, preparation costs can be high.*

ACREAGE

upon your plan to erect a four-story Victorian. An agent who specializes in the area you're considering will also be able to tell you things like where the shopping centers and schools are and how long it might take you to get to work.

ZERO IN

Now that you know where you want to live and you have been assured the home of your dreams won't stick out like a sore thumb, it's time to look at some actual properties.

Many of the same considerations that came into play when seeking a neighborhood will crop up again here. You'll want to know where you are in relation to work, schools and shopping (closer is better), as well as things like airports, poorly secured prisons and tanneries (farther is better.)

You'll also want to make sure the plot on which you're building fits your plans. Lots With Character (i.e., slopes, rocky formations, washes) may add quirkiness and visual depth to your finished home, but they are not without drawbacks. "People often underestimate or just plain don't know about the cost of lot preparation," says Chip Alexander, owner of Alexander Homes. "If you have to do a lot of work just to get the property ready to work on, the price can really go up." For example, a fairly even, nonsloping bit of land can cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 in preparation costs, whereas those with washes or hills can run you anywhere from \$30,000 all the way up to \$100,000 for severe sloping, Alexander says.

A sloped or mountainous parcel may also be a problem if you have difficulty getting around. It may be fanciful and fun to access the laundry room by zip-lining across a canyon right now, but after your second hip replacement, it may lose some of its appeal.

The upside of Lots With Character is the potential for a more appealing finished product. "I like lots with some character: a good view, some rock formations, unusual trees," Irani says. "I designed one home that had a wash running right through the property. It was beautiful. There are valid reasons to shy away from character in a lot, but those difficult elements can be translated into positives for the finished home."

SYSTEMS CHECK

A less tempting, but equally important issue you'll want to ponder is how your finished house will function on a day-to-day basis. Aside from cosmetic restrictions your neighborhood may impose on construction, you should inquire about things like sewage and electric systems, any easements on the property and whether or not your home is part of a flood plain.

Environmental issues that may affect your plans for the land should be examined, as well as the future proposals for surrounding properties. Ever see a gorgeous home next to a sausage factory and wonder why they chose to build there? Odds are, they didn't.

MAKE AN OFFER


Now, you're ready to buy. Call your real estate agent, and, in your best tycoon voice, make an offer.

How much should you volunteer right out of the gate? It depends on the property. If it's been on the market awhile, or if recent sales in the area have been sluggish, you may want to offer low. If the price seems about fair, you can meet it exactly.

If you are looking to save a few dollars, remember that almost every aspect of land buying is negotiable. You may be able to save money by having the seller pay for closing costs or landscaping. In fact, you could probably get the agent to throw in his tie or his desk if you're crafty enough.

Once your offer is accepted—and congratulations by the way—you're well on your way to property ownership. Does this mean you can start sinking a foundation? Unfortunately not. You're about to enter the world of closings, preclosings and pre-preclosings. This is a strange land where the sea consists of signatures and the fields grow pens with company logos on them.

Although the process may be nerve-racking and tense, try to relax. Remember, you've already got the perfect line to lighten the mood at closing time...

"Well, at least I'm getting a lot for my money." 



Finding an Architect

After laboring over your lot, you'd better find the perfect person to design the perfect home.

"Finding an architect is like finding a doctor," says Gustad Irani of Scottsdale's Organic Design Workshop. "You should put as much time into finding the right person as you do the right land. Two homes can each cost a million dollars to build, but the one where the owners put more thought into their architect will always look better." Here's a step-by-step guide to your match made in heaven.

1. Figure out if you already know the perfect person. Does one of your friends live in your dream house? Find out who designed it.
2. If nothing comes immediately to mind, start collecting names. Visit The American Institute of Architects' Web site (www.aia.org), and check out magazines like this one.

If you're driving around and see a project you like, make a note of the architect's name.

3. Once you have a list of candidates, narrow them down with a series of phone interviews. Find out how much each architect charges, and get a sense of whether or not the two of you would get along.
4. Now that you have a shortlist, go meet the candidates. An architect's office should tell you a lot about his or her style. Whether it's messy or clean, conservative or creative, you should feel comfortable and respond favorably to the surroundings.
5. If you find an architect you like, look over his or her credentials and past projects. Then, if everything's in order, visit your lot. Find out if he or she loves it as much as you do.
6. If everything's going swimmingly, we say, seal the deal.