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## Envision's Knowlton Knows Design and Building

Envision Design Build | Houston, Texas





# Envision's Knowlton Knows Design and Building

By Kathy Bowen Stolz | Photography by Kathleen O. Ryan





Jack Knowlton has always had a good eye for design. Even as a kid growing up in Houston's Memorial neighborhood, his friends and family recognized his talent for art and architecture. Others recognized his talent, too.

He got his first job soon after high school working for a residential design firm where he worked his way up to vice president in just 10 years. After becoming a Certified Professional Building Designer, Jack started designing homes for some of Houston's largest home builders before opening his own firm, The Purser Knowlton Partnership, with a former co-worker in 1985.



For most creative people, designing homes would be enough, but in 1991 Jack discovered he also had a passion for building after designing and constructing his own home (where he still lives with his wife of 36 years). “When I built my own home, I realized knowing how to build a home was invaluable for design.”

Unfortunately his partner in their award-winning design firm didn’t want to expand into building. What happens when you no longer fit in a box? You make a new box!

Knowlton called his new company Envision Design Build. “I wanted a name that best describes what we do,” he said. The company offers design and construction of new custom homes and remodeling design and construction in addition to construction management. It’s been operating since 1998.

The company focuses on Memorial Villages, Oak Forest, River Oaks, West University and Tanglewood neighborhoods in Houston but has also done work in Galveston, Austin and Hearne.

“I love taking a project from a blank sheet of paper all the way to handing over the keys to the homeowner.

“I also love the interaction with clients. I develop a close and trusting bond with them. There’s nothing more gratifying than having a client call me and ask for my services a second or third time.”

Jack’s clients are professional upper-middle-income families with a dream. To make sure he’s seeing the clients’ dreams as they do, he asks them to bring in photographs. “They may explain something they want, but it may be different than what I envision. I want to get inside their heads. When they’re saying ‘this,’ do they really mean ‘that’? Photographs always help.

“I love the creativity. I create sketches to see if we’re all on the same page. The computer program I use has 3D capabilities, which helps my clients see the finished product before it is built. Usually, after a revision, we’re pretty close to what they envision. I create working drawings and make sure all parts of the home are



“I love taking a project from a blank sheet of paper all the way to handing over the keys....”



included. Then, I produce the scope of work.”

However, he’s not always the builder for the houses he designs – the projects have to be a good fit. Occasionally he’s only the construction manager. (About 10-15 percent of his business comes from construction management.) Whatever role he plays depends on the situation.

One of the projects Jack is most proud of is the house featured in this magazine. “I like it because it’s a true Spanish style, not a hybrid. The owners and I worked long hours to come up with numerous unique architectural details.”

Unlike many designers, Knowlton enjoys being in the field overseeing projects, using his problem-solving skills. “There are always unforeseen things that come up. A subcontractor says, ‘Jack, we have a problem here.’ That’s not a problem, that’s an opportunity to make a better end product. Some of my better design features came from a problem made into opportunity.”

Unlike most builders, Knowlton also enjoys both new builds and remodeling projects.”I like the challenge of designing a remodel to flow seamlessly from old to new.” He also enjoys pulling apart a house and putting it back together. “That’s when my problem-solving skills come in. I enjoy that challenge. In a new build the process is much more predictable.”

Of course remodeling projects also may have challenges for clients. Some may move out and others may stay during the process, he said; each project is different. Clients in an upcoming project will move out for a month while the kitchen is torn out and rebuilt, for example.

Many of Envision’s new build and renovation projects incorporate aging-in-place features; in fact, they comprise 30-50 percent of the company’s work in some way, whether it’s installing roll-in showers, special cabinet designs, flush thresholds or grab bars. In one case a two-story home’s design included a closet stacked atop another so the space could be converted into an elevator in the future if necessary.

Knowlton, who is a Certified Aging-In-Place Specialist (CAPS), got interested in aging-in-place design and universal design after a client asked him to remodel a home to meet ADA standards for the client’s wheelchair-bound daughter and three others. It is now a group home





maintained by Vital Living, Inc.

“The client and I went to different group homes for research. He showed me the things that his daughter needed for daily living. The whole process was very heartwarming to me that I was actually helping someone in dire need to feel more independent.

One of Envision’s current projects is a home being torn down and rebuilt in Oak Forest so its owner can age in place. The client, who has lived in the home for quite a while, wants to remain there for many more years. The new one-story home features roll-in showers, wider doorways and halls, grab bars, lever-type door handles

and faucets, lowered light switches, LED lighting, no-slip surfaces and ADA flush thresholds.

Garrett Shaw serves as Envision’s field supervisor. A graduate of the University of Houston’s construction management program, Shaw does the estimating and scheduling for the four-to-six projects underway at any given time. His skills complement Knowlton’s design background.

“Garrett’s the best employee I’ve ever had. He’s a very smart young man. He started as an intern, and I’ve been able to mentor him and teach him how I want a home to be built.” Shaw joined Envision a year and a half ago. Knowlton said Shaw plans to become certified as a graduate master remodeler.

During the next five years Knowlton plans to build four to six high-end spec homes each year to meet demand. However, he plans to continue building custom homes and continue remodels for individual clients. “We don’t advertise; our business comes through client referrals and our website.”

Knowlton is proud of his certifications from the National Association of Home Builders, which also include Graduate Master Builder and Certified Green Professional. “I hope they show my prospective clients that I care enough to learn more about the business I’m in.”

In his leisure time Jack enjoys riding his Harley-Davidson for relaxation. “I love to ride. I ride all year round.” He has been a member of a local motorcycle club for 10 years. The club members give back to the community whenever they can.

He would love to ride around Europe, studying architecture. His motorcycle club now has a chapter in Rome. Who knows? Maybe he’ll be steering down the narrow streets of Europe soon, with his wife behind him, refining his good eye for design with first-hand views of architectural classics.

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