

ON THE LEVEL: At Wade Weissmann , Wynn designs custom-built homes amid rising prices, supply shortages

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Tom Wynn

Supply shortages and rising materials prices are now among the most disruptive forces of construction projects and custom-built houses are no exception.

Tom Wynn, studio director at Wade Weissmann Architecture, said he has seen owners respond to higher-than-expected costs by doing everything to reducing the planned size of a new project, to substituting in less expensive materials, to walking away altogether.

One of his biggest jobs is finding ways to ensure clients can still have their dream homes amid nearly record high inflation and shortages of popular construction materials.

It's work Wynn has long been preparing for. Some of his fondest memories are of time spent on the family farm outside of Xenia, Ohio, where he grew up building hay bale forts in the barn and log cabins in the woods and dreaming of ways to improve the physical world. His eventual interest in architecture and design led him to the college of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati, which he graduated from in 1996.

From there he pursued his career in the Chicago at the renowned firm of Hammond Beeby & Babka (now HBRA Architects), whose work became a beacon to him after seeing one of its projects featured on the

cover of Architectural Digest. About 20 years later he moved again, this time to Milwaukee to become studio director at Wade Weissmann Architecture.

His current work has him overseeing more than two dozen staff members not only in Milwaukee but also in Pittsburgh and Santa Barbara, California. He recently sat down with The Daily Reporter to discuss recent trends in the industry, the demand for custom-built housing and his work to bring young architects into architecture.

The Daily Reporter: What are some of the trends you've seen in the past year? How have you and your firm been responding to them?

Wynn: I would say that over the last two years (since the onset of the pandemic), we have seen a significant uptick in work, with a major focus on projects in lake country and the Northwoods. With the wide-spread utilization of tech platforms like Zoom, there has clearly been an increased interest in autonomous properties that families can retreat to, not to mention lifestyle-oriented projects that make working from home much more viable.

TDR: How do you think obstacles like rising prices and supply shortages affect designers of custom-built housing differently than, say, large commercial residential builders?

Wynn: Great question! Obviously, it affects both sectors to some degree. However, I think that the commercial homebuilders are particularly hard hit at this moment. This is most likely because a large percentage of their customers are first time home buyers who are effectively being taken out of the market due to building material inflation and higher interest rates. That's not to say that we haven't also seen some hesitancy to accept the current market prices in the custom residential arena. Most of our clients also want to be prudent and not over-invest in a project if it doesn't align with their long-term goals. However, it seems that the most resilient clients are those looking to create multi-generational compounds, such as a house with guest house or other outbuildings.

TDR: Do you think some of these pressures are likely to ease in the coming year or so?

Wynn: Barring something unforeseen, yes – higher material costs and interest rates have dampened a large portion of the construction industry, so it seems likely that we will see those pressures start to ease in the relatively near future as a natural result of decreased demand. Of course, oil prices are always going to play an important part in this equation since our industry, like any other, is heavily reliant on the production and transportation of people, goods and services.

TDR: What do your day-to-day responsibilities entail?

Wynn: Participation in the management of a design firm at this point in history means every day is new adventure. Despite an almost unprecedented increase in demand, I still spend a fair amount of time fielding new project inquiries and looking at properties, however, the bulk of my time is spent working with our project teams to fine-tune the design vision and resolve the countless details that go into producing a timeless heirloom-worthy piece of architecture.

TDR: Talk a bit about your work to bring younger architects into the field of traditional residential architecture. Do you find it difficult to draw young people into your line of work or are many new recruits to the industry interested in it with little prompting?

Wynn: Our line of work is certainly unique in that we occupy a position somewhere between engineering and the humanities. Fortunately, there are schools like Notre Dame, which provide a curriculum oriented towards traditional and classical architecture that help supply a stream of young architects who are interested in this kind of design work. That said, recruiting experienced talent from other markets to

Milwaukee has been a little bit of a challenge, so we have opted to invest in our energies into our current staff and to develop that talent from within.

TDR: What are some of the most prominent and well-known projects you and your firm have worked on in the Milwaukee area and throughout Wisconsin?

Wynn: We have been fortunate enough to have worked on many wonderful projects in Wisconsin. In addition to custom-built homes designed to stand the test of time, we have also worked on a golf course, bars, restaurants, and our headquarters.