

Basics of Building: Step 3 – The Home by Michael Watson

If you were to ask me, “Hey Mike, what is the most common question you get from total strangers over the telephone?” As you hear in the background Richard Dawson the old TV game show host of Family Feud yell, “Survey Says!” It would be, “WHAT IS **YOUR** COST PER SQUARE FOOT?”

Now how did *that* question become the number one question that Contractors are asked? It’s almost like getting crank calls, “Do you have Prince Albert in the Can? Well, you better let him out!” or, “Is your refrigerator running? You better chase it, it’s getting away!” I know I’m getting old, but is that carbon dating myself? Not that I...Uh... have ever made crank calls.

Now, I’m not intending this to insult anybody especially if you have asked this question before. Typically, I get a barrage of fun spirited crank calls from people I usually know, asking me the “Square Foot Question” whenever I publish this type of article; but seriously it’s a difficult question to answer. Here’s why:

Claiming the status of a Custom Home Builder, that usually means your open for business to design and build what ever the potential client desires. That being the case, the sky is the limit (reality check...what this really means is, *what their back pocket can actually afford*). After I have screamed into a pillow I keep in my office, if I’m feeling frisky, I will reply, “How much per square foot can you afford?” It’s never worked well, especially with strangers who don’t know my sense of humor, so I don’t use that one often.

The truth is, “How much **CAN** you afford per square foot?” The best way to use that equation is to give a General Contractor a Full Set of Plans, not a Crystal Ball, and ask them to give you a Cost per Square Foot. You can then use that theory from Contractor to Contractor to find out who believes they can give you the best bang for your buck. But a Contractor does deserve to have all the information. (*Stay tuned for an Article on “Types of Contractors” to help save you tons of money in regards to Blueprints and the Building Process*).

Now let’s complicate this a little. If you have been following this series exclusively in “The Loop” you now know that Mikie believes that →ALL← the costs should be included in the “Cost per Foot” theory. That now includes if your buying Land for the build, the “Site Related Costs”, and the “Cost of the Home” itself. Wow! That’s a lot! But at least it’s honest and accurate. Believe me, that’s how the bank guy who is planning how you will spend your money with him for the next 30 years sees it.

“So Mike, what **do** I look for if I desire to build a cost effective home, how do I get the most for my money?” NOW, you’re asking great questions! So here ya go:

You will get more square footage for your money if:

1. **You have four exterior walls without additional corners.** Every time you change directions you have added additional work for every trade. The Foundation guy, the Framers, the Electrician, the Plumber, the HVAC, the Drywall Guy, the Siding Guy, the Roofer, the Trim Guy, everybody has to negotiate those additional changes in direction. I’m not saying don’t add corners; just realize that it cost more to build.
2. **Your Roof has 2 Roof Planes.** This means if you look at it from one side it’s a triangle. As you add new roof planes your adding labor costs where the Framer is required to calculate and construct. Simple plans equate to simple builds. Simple builds equal lower labor costs. Also remember that the pitch or “slope” of the roof can add costs, especially when you move past an 8:12 Slope. This means for every 12 inches in horizontal distance the roof rises 8 inches. The steeper the slope, the more difficult and dangerous to construct. Martin Brothers uses a 6:12 slope as their standard.
3. **Your House Plan is a Single Story.** Height equals additional labor, time, and danger, as the elevation increases the “Cost per Square Foot” increases. Workman’s Comp although tremendously reduced thanks to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, but is still very expensive to hire Roofers and Framers. With all the CAL OSHA safety requirements, there are some Contractors that only build one-story homes. We build 2 and even 3 story homes!
4. **Add a Basement!** Believe it or not, the cost per square foot is lower on unfinished basements than on normal construction. Especially on the sides of hills where excavation is required anyway. What a great way to add square footage to your home! Instead of doing the popular raised foundation and pay for the wasted crawl space; add a full basement and get the added

useable space. Martin Brothers even has a plumbing kit we can add just under the concrete surface for a future bathroom! Later, once you have settled in, you can pull permits to add additional bedrooms or game rooms or whatever you desire. Make sure you size your Septic and your HVAC (Heating and Cooling) for future Bedrooms.

5. **Build Energy Star!** Although Martin Brothers' building standards exceed Energy Star Certifications, there are several ways to save big money in the long run. I always say, "Pay the Price and Cry Once." Energy conservation is not just a fad, but growing to be a way of life! Clocking your home on the property to capture the best of its environment. Tankless Water Heaters have come of age, "Why heat water 24-7 when you can heat it as you need it." We exclusively use Andersen Energy Efficient Low-E Windows. Blown-in Blankets or "BIBS" as oppose to Batt insulation in 2x6 Walls are far more energy efficient. Building "Green" is the latest and greatest, as it should be. It saves a lot of money in the long run. Remember: Heating dense mass is far more efficient than heating air. So re-circulating heated water through you concrete floors is more efficient than heating the air within your new home.
6. **Build in Kern County!** Kern County is still one of the best Counties for construction. In the last 7 years Martin Brothers has built 88 Custom Homes, only 1 of those is in Los Angeles County which has been a 3 Ring Circus. Kern uses common sense and approaches the building process in a practical way. They have a single facility located in Bakersfield where they have a one-stop shop, housing all the entities important for the building process making it simple to get through Plan Check and Approval. Compared to Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino, and Santa Barbara, there is no comparison when it comes to the overall cost of permits and fees. Kern County is by far the most cost effective County to build in. Plan Check usually will take no more than 6 to 8 weeks and your breaking ground! Los Angeles County took 4 YEARS for our Client.
7. **You watch the little things that add up.** This is where asking the generic question about square foot cost hits home. What are these? Flooring, Cabinets, Countertops, Roofing, Siding, etc. All these things add up to big money if not watched and handled correctly. We use to give people "Allowance Categories" that were included in their loan package to go pick these items out. We found that most often they go way over their budget and then are irritated with us for not "Saving them from themselves". Now we give standards and allow people to upgrade via a Change Order to help them better manage their money.

These are some great ways to keep costs down both initially and long term. Yes, some of them do cost more in the beginning, but they will pay back in the long run and add value compared to your neighbor if you choose to sell in the future. Martin Brothers will help you sift through options that fit your needs. As a Design Builder and a Turn-Key Contractor we are working through all of our existing plans to re-orient them to newer technologies and striving to include new ways to cut costs *and* build more energy efficient homes that you can enjoy for years to come.

So in conclusion to this series of the "3 Costs" I hope I gave a good general overview of how to look at Land, Evaluate the Site Related Costs, and to Build a Home on it. Martin Brothers is all-inclusive to all 3 steps and can assist you in building intelligently from scratch to finish.

Thanks for reading, I hope that I both, "Entertained and Educated" you on some of the "Basics of Building."

Michael Watson is the General Manager and RMO of Martin Brothers Development Inc., a local Custom Home Builder to the Tehachapi, Frazier Park and Bakersfield area. Martin Brothers is a 40-year-old company who has built 88 custom homes in the last 7 years on the West Coast and 100's of Custom Homes in Pennsylvania. You can contact Michael at 888-375-1129 or write him with questions or comments at mikew@martinbrothersinc.com You can visit Martin Brothers Development Inc. on the web at www.martinbrothersinc.com.