

Season 1, Episode 3 : Building and Reno Ideas, Oh My!

Announcer: You're listening to Real Life Renos with Karen Brown and Melissa Schenk. The show where this dynamic duo gets real about your life because change happens to more than just your home.

Melissa: Hi, I'm Melissa.

Karen: And I'm Karen.

Melissa: And we are live today at Cowbell Brewing Company in Blyth Ontario, for the Stratford and Area Builders' Association Parade of Homes, it's the SABA PICNIK, and on today's show, we don't do it every day, but today we are actually talking about new home construction, and renovations. One of my favorite topics!

Karen: And what a great place to do it, Cowbell is absolutely a gorgeous facility.

Melissa: And we are going to be having the one and only Steven Sparling himself, the owner, the brainchild, the creator ... I'm really excited to hear what he has to say coming up in his keynote. This is a remarkable facility and there is so much care and love that goes into building a facility like this. And we are going to be speaking with a number of builders from the Stratford and Area Builders' Association that put care and love into all the homes that they build as well.

Karen: And renovate.

Melissa: And renovate.

Karen: In those homes that people absolutely loving, cannot bring themselves to leave.

Melissa: So let's get to it.

Melissa: And now we've got with us from Larry Otten Contracting, Larry you are what ... what I say a builder of lifestyles. What does that mean? I've seen that in certain places in some of your advertising, how would you quantify that?

Larry: Well, we've been actually starting now, we're into our 30th year of building, and historically we did a lot of custom homes, a lot of subdivision homes. And in 2010 I bought some land in Goderich with the intention of actually designing and building for lifestyles. And so what that would mean would be my target would have been looking at someone whose soon to retire, or retiring demographic, and by having a lifestyle driven product, it would be a home that would enhance that season of their life. Would enable them to age in place, it would enable them to have their lifestyle simplified, by having grass and snow

taken care of as part of the whole maintenance package. And just offering them a home that would be single floor living, we would build in things like, 34 inch doorways ... things that it's not necessarily an accessible home, but it would be a home that would be semi-accessible and could accommodate people as they aged. If they were unfortunate enough have challenges with mobility, then those needs could still be met and enhanced in that situation.

Karen: Are you finding that people know what to ask for? Or are you guiding conversations? Or how does that conversation play out?

Larry: When we started in 2011, when we introduced product into the market in Goderich, the economy was a little different than it is now. Now it's probably a lot easier to sell a house than it is to build a house. Back then it was easier to build and much harder to sell. And one of the roadblocks that we hit was even though people needed to make a move, they knew that they needed to make a move, they still couldn't quite bring themselves to making that decision. And a friend of mine, who's a realtor, often says, "Not making a decision is still making a decision."

Karen: For sure.

Melissa: Oh absolutely.

Larry: I have a couple great examples of that as well, because you know in terms of how our product could enhance their lifestyles or extend their lifestyles. We had one purchaser who when we first started introducing product to market, had been through the units, knew that they had to move. Never did. Finally, a couple years in ... to the project, put an offer on one, an unfortunately in the time period when they had bought the unit, to the time that they actually had sold their house, they were packing up to move, and she fell. She was in a split level home, she fell down the stairs, broke her hip. A couple weeks in the hospital, she was about to be released that day, she passed away.

Karen: Oh.

Larry: Now I released them from their offer, because then her husband actually needed to go into an extended care home. And to me it was really tragic because it was a situation where, if they would have bought at that initial offering, they would have been in a home that wouldn't have had the stairs, was all one level living, and I would expect that she would have lived a lot longer. You know?

Larry: Another example was my father-in-law, they moved into the development when it was first opened. And I saw their health improve when they moved in. I saw it was like they had a whole new lease on life. They had went from an older home when we went over there we would actually bring our kids home and have to

give them a bath and get rid of all the mold and mildew smell from their clothes. And I just saw that their breathing was better, their skin conditions were better, the stiffness in their bodies was better. They just ... there wasn't any care in the winter time, you know, is that snow going to cause an ice dam and back up?

Larry: And so their whole quality of life just radically improved, it was like I watched them get younger. And they were there I think maybe three years and my father-in-law had a stroke. He was only in the hospital for two days and we were able to get him home. We fit the garage with a wheelchair ramp, he was able to go through all the doorways in the wheelchair, he was able to still with a little bit of help, bathe. The showers had a seat in them, had a hand held shower bar. All the toilets were comfort height toilets.

Larry: So it totally, totally set up for him. If he would have been in his previous residence, he never would have been able to be released, to go home, let alone be released two days in. And so those are a couple examples of just how that lifestyle really can extend that stay.

Larry: And it's unfortunate for me, as a builder, I can bring people with all kinds of information, but I can't make choices for people. And you try to use those situations to maybe help people, or encourage people, but I think back even when my father, who was always really, really healthy. We had an acre property in the country, lots of maintenance. As far as Dad was concerned he was going to die there. And he ended up with Parkinson's and Lewy Body Dementia. And I watched the early on-set of it, having a conversation saying, "Dad, you need to move somewhere that you can actually get into a place, where you'll be able to stay there for as long as possible.". And he had no interest in it and then all of a sudden one day he said, "Yeah, okay. Will you help me look for a place to stay?". And it really hit me because there was so little product in the housing market that actually would accommodate somebody with health issues, that they could live in a place that could be either accessible or semi-accessible, or with a certain amount of care, could live in that place.

Larry: So it was a really different place for my father to be in, and then when they finally found a place, it really wasn't great. It wasn't ideal, but it did serve the last four years of his life.

Melissa: What year would that have been?

Larry: That would have been I'm going to say 2006. So, we actually built an affordable housing apartment in St Mary's, 30 units, 12 of them were under an affordable mandate from the provincial and federal government. And so we did 12 units, that were geared to either people with disabilities or low-income seniors. And we did ... It was like very, very close to an accessible apartment unit. And that was a lot in part motivated in watching how my Dads experience had played out, and realizing that there really is such little product, or such little housing

available for people to age in place. And that's why it's so important, I think, that people really are honest with what their abilities are, or what their limitations are, but also to still have vision for what your future is.

Larry: And the one great thing about building homes is, that I see that what we build can actually make peoples life better. Yeah.

Melissa: Absolutely.

Larry: And that to me is the most rewarding part about being a builder, is when I'm taillights down the road after we build a house, or a development, it's not just about me but I look behind and I see peoples lifestyles are greatly enhanced. Their quality of lives are improved. So, that to me is very rewarding piece.

Melissa: You hit the nail on the head with the vision. People have to have vision about their own lives. And what may be coming 20 or 30 years down the road. I mean, a home is the biggest investment that any of us ever make.

Larry: Absolutely, and if you look at the cost of living in semi ... like, homes that have various levels of care, it's extremely expensive. So if you have a home that is an appreciable asset that is set up to accommodate your lifestyle changes as you age. Then that's still probably the most cost effective place for you to age in. And I still think it gives you the most sense of dignity. The most sense of quality of life. Especially when you look at condo type units, or townhouse type developments, where they actually integrated or cultivate a sense of community, then that is another component that gets added in to some of those developments.

Karen: Absolutely.

Melissa: Last question for you. Are you finding then people are aging in place, but finding a new location to do that? So to speak, instead of renovating so much, they're going into a ready-for-you ...

Larry: Well, I've often heard it said, "It's too bad we don't build houses like we used to.", and for the most part I'm actually glad that we don't. Our homes today are so much better. I remember a story, back in, I'm going to say, the mid 80s, I was apprenticing for a builder in Kitchener, and we had some lots, and he starts building the houses, and all of a sudden this new builder appears. And I remember Ralph coming up the one day and he starts laughing and he says, "You know, those people that are starting, their new builders, they're just real estate agents, they don't know anything about building, construction, or anything like that. And they've got this crazy design, it's called open concept.

Melissa: (laughs)

Karen: (laughs)

Larry: Like I don't know how anybody would ever buy it, or why anybody would ever expect that they could build it and sell it.". And about a month later he comes by, "I can't believe it! They've sold 12 of those crazy open concept things!".

Karen: That's hilarious.

Melissa: And now what are we doing now? Knocking down walls.

Larry: And we had two of your traditional ... like, narrow hallways/small room type houses and nobody wanted them. And I remember it was just such a lesson for me as an apprentice carpenter, that here Ralph, even though he was a great builder, has lost touch with the trends in the market. And, that vintage of house, just is not set up well. We were building small two-stories, cape cods, split levels, but very rarely a one-floor living bungalow. Let alone, open concept. And it was such a lesson for me just like wow, you have to pay attention to what the market wants and needs. And this need for accessible homes that people are not necessarily accessible, but the potential to accommodate access. And, because I find people ... you know, even grab bars, people don't want grab bars on their shower because probably it reminds them that they're not as strong and flexible as they used to be. And, so it's interesting we build them so that grab bars can be added in, but most people do not want a grab bar until they absolutely have to have one.

Karen: Sometimes by then it's too late.

Larry: It is too late.

Karen: Yeah.

Larry: So these are things where there's so much stigma, you know, getting old is overrated sometimes, maybe? For people to still realize that if they think it through in a very intentional way, they can have a home that can really enhance their future.

Karen: Absolutely.

Melissa: Oh, thank you Larry ... well, this is why we're here today at the SABA PICNIK, right? To learn, to continue to grow, to continue to stay with the trends, and ... open concept, is not a new concept now, but it was back then and who knows where we're headed in the future.

Melissa: Perfect. Thank you Larry.

Larry: Oh, you're welcome.

- Melissa: I'd like to introduce to you John Meinen, owner of Pinnacle Quality Homes, John is the current president of the Stratford and Area Builders' Association, the past president of the O.H.B.A., and the incoming president of C.H.B.A., the Canadian Home Builders' Association. So, you've been in the industry for the past 20-some-odd years?
- John Meinen: Well I've been in the industry for over 30 years, but I've been involved in the Association for 20 years.
- Melissa: Okay.
- John Meinen: I was fourth time president of the Stratford and Area Builders', on the board of directors I believe since 2000, early ... maybe even 1999, kind of thing. I can't remember.
- Melissa: But you have been immersed in this and what I love about you John, is that not only do you build and construct homes, but you are in this in all levels of government, dealing with all of the political issues at stake here, right across our country. Now coming into the Canadian Home Builders' Association, I wanted to ask you, there was a recent conference for the C.H.B.A., and a lot of talk this year about aging in place. Could you kind of give us a synopsis or an overview of what happened at the conference this year in Niagara Falls?
- John Meinen: Well, you know, obviously all levels of government are now interested in the new energy efficiency building codes, and there's a lot of focus put on Net Zero and Net Zero ready. There's also a lot of focus put on aging in place at the Canadian Home Builders' Association with the program, which is all about the aging in place ... matter of fact, we have Gary Sharp coming to our June dinner meeting, to talk about all that ... the Stratford and area builders dinner meeting on the third Wednesday in June, but every time you change something in the energy efficiency programs obviously that all hits the National Building Code, we need to think affordability in homes. So over the years, everything that we change, it's not just development charges, it's our building practices. And our building practices are costing more money per home.
- John Meinen: So what does that do? That puts us in an affordability issue again. So just necessarily to put building code, aging in place, or accessible homes, to put that in the National Building Code, obviously is going to change the affordability of our millennial homes. A lot of people talk about new homes and aging in place, zero entry homes and should we be focusing more on that? Yes we should. I think builders need to at least put it out there as options. Which I don't think there's been enough of because as you know and everybody knows today, we're in a baby boomer age, and we need more of these homes. We need more homes that are accessible to people with wheelchairs, and people that have ability issues moving forward.

- John Meinen: But for governments to get in our way and put it in building code and make it mandatory, I think that will affect our affordability issue. Like I said earlier, but I think, moving forward, it should be front and center of every builder, in their programs, and in their option list, like if I can call it that. And I think that's probably one of the most important things here in the next 10 to 15 years.
- Melissa: Why are we not hearing a lot about it right now though? Why are we not hearing a lot right now? The options, we don't hear about aging in place very ... I don't hear a lot of talk about that. About building homes for it, it's just sort of not in the forefront.
- Karen: Might be a bit of a chicken-and-the-egg thing, if the consumers aren't asking for it, the builders aren't offering it, it's like who jumps first?
- John Meinen: And you're exactly right. You got to remember builders build homes with profitability in mind, which is not a bad thing, this is why we're in the business. But then maybe we should be changing our focus a little bit, to see what actually the needs are of the consumers, instead of just consumers ... our focus right now is on millennials, right?
- Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- John Meinen: Affordability, let's lower the stress test. Let's figure out how we can get younger millennials buying more homes. And that's all ... you hear that a lot. Which is very, very important in our industry. We need that.
- Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- John Meinen: But we also need to figure out where these people are going that are ...
- Melissa: Where they're going to live afterwards, yes.
- John Meinen: 55 to 70, 75 to 80, where are they going? Aging in place is becoming a big issue. People would love to just age at home and have the facilities that they can do that in. And I think that's very, very important because I believe generally people would pay for care within their own home instead of in a facility if their home was equipped with everything they needed to live there.
- Karen: Over 90% are going to age in place anyway according to Statistics Canada, there simply aren't long term care beds. So we have to look to the home and what can happen there. But touching on that, can you explain a little bit, about the C-CAPS program, what the certification is, how people get it?
- John Meinen: I didn't hear that sorry.

- Karen: Oh sorry, it's a little bit noisy here in the room, can you talk a little bit about the C-CAPS certification program?
- Melissa: And Gary Sharp will be talking about that in a later episode here but-
- John Meinen: Yeah, the C-CAPS program is something that we at the National Association have been focusing on a lot and I don't have the in-depth knowledge of the ... like I said, it's fairly new for us too. I wouldn't say new, but it's something that Gary Sharp at the National Office has been working on, so all the details I don't have, and I apologize for that, but I do know that it's a thing front and center that we have to as builders and even community that everybody that's involved and not just the community care but, making sure maybe retrofits to homes that need to be done.
- John Meinen: Just to give you an example, my father-in-law, built him a home in 1998, and we went in six months ago and retrofitted that home with a lift, and other items that he now has the ability to go upstairs, five or six steps, instead of selling the home and moving out.
- Karen: Right.
- John Meinen: So he has that ability now and one of the big problems is not just in the energy efficiency end of it, we all talk about energy efficiency in new homes, we all talk about accessibility in new homes ... one of the things that we are really, really forgetting about is how do we put programs in place for existing. Not just energy efficiency in existing, because the biggest portion of very poor efficient homes are existing stock.
- John Meinen: This is where we need the focus on and the new homes, yes, put it out there as options. Are you build ... are you better off renovating? Or are you better off buying a new one? Right?
- Karen: Right.
- John Meinen: Those numbers everybody needs to put together. But let's talk about retrofitting. Let's talk about staying in your home. Let's talk about ... why do we want to sell the home to build the new home that's more you know, user friendly? Why don't we talk about retrofitting older homes to keep people in the homes that they love, and they've been there for years, and they want to stay there?
- Karen: To the extent that it's possible, absolutely.
- Melissa: And last question for you John, do you think you're going to see a trend where there are more renovations happening then versus new home builds? Or do you think it will still be like a 50/50 sort of-

John Meinen: [crosstalk 00:20:45] I think you're absolutely right Melissa, I think you're going to see a huge trend in the reno market. When it comes to aging in place. That to me is probably going to be a bigger segment of the market, than in the new homes. But that being said, let's offer it. As builders, let's offer it in their new home. If it's \$5000 or \$10, 000 to sink that floor in, or it's \$5000 to put that shower in you were talking about. Or it's \$10, 000 more, let's talk about that. Let's put those options out there. Because I'll tell you, it's a lot simpler and less expensive, to put it in at the beginning, in a new home-

Karen: [crosstalk 00:21:24] For sure-

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:21:24] Right-

John Meinen: [crosstalk 00:21:24] than it is to retrofitting ... and you asked me earlier, "What would it cost percentage-wise?", right? Depends on where you are in the house. Obviously wheel-in shower you've got to drop your floor in that shower. Can you do that? Is there a crawl space in there? Is there an eight foot basement in there? What is the engineering involved? What are the steel beams involved? What are the wood beams involved? How do you do it very cost effectively? Right?

Karen: Right.

John Meinen: So, every situation is different, but at the end of the day, we need to start talking about it.

Melissa: Well, and-

John Meinen: [crosstalk 00:21:57] And there's not enough talk about it, I don't think. There's ... everybody's-

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:22:00] No, because the only way things get solved is by talking.

John Meinen: Exactly. And you know what, there's a lot of focus I believe on energy efficiency, and this is not a bad thing.

Melissa: No it's not a bad thing.

John Meinen: And all our building codes are reflecting that.

Melissa: But there's more.

John Meinen: But there's more. And as builders, I think, we always do what's kind of mandated by National Building Code, or by governments, but I can say this, we as an industry, lead the way in energy efficiency. We never really needed governments mandating us to do what we have now in the building code. We

were far ahead of that game before it ever happened, right? So I've been building Energy Star homes since 2004, since the inception of the program. As have a lot of builders.

- John Meinen: We're dabbling now in Net Zero ready homes, right? I know builders that build 100% Net Zero ready homes. We're there, we're there. Will we get there by 2030 completely with every builder? I don't think so. But let us lead the way. We know what we're doing when it comes to that field. But I'll say it again, also got to think about aging in place, we got to think about resiliency in homes these days, because our weather patterns are changing. There's more than just energy efficiency. There's a awful lot on the horizon when it comes to building homes.
- Melissa: Well, and when there were rebates in government for energy efficiency, I would like to see rebates for aging in place happen at a government level.
- Karen: Absolutely.
- John Meinen: Absolutely, I think that's a great idea.
- Karen: [crosstalk 00:23:27] From your lips to Gods ear.
- Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- John Meinen: We used to have tax rebates for renovations in energy efficiency, exactly.
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:23:34] From your windows, to your roof, to whatever it is, I think we need to have that then, for aging in place.
- John Meinen: Yup.
- Karen: You're right.
- John Meinen: Let's have some tax rebates for retrofitting your home so you can stay in your home for that extra five years, or that extra 10 years.
- Melissa: And then we-
- John Meinen: [crosstalk 00:23:46] There's also people, at the end of the day that's what people want.
- Karen: For sure.
- John Meinen: They don't want to go to a facility, they want to be able to stay at home. If they can afford to pay for the care at home they want to stay at home.

- Karen: Absolutely.
- Melissa: Well and think what would do for our government in health care. You're saving how much money?
- Karen: [crosstalk 00:24:02] Oh yes.
- Melissa: So, that's what I would like to see is a rebate coming for that in the future. So we'll put that out there.
- Karen: (laughs)
- Melissa: Okay? Thank you John.
- John Meinen: You're quite welcome.
- Melissa: Okay, I'd like to introduce you to Brett Bickell, of Bickell built Homes. Had the pleasure of touring one of your latest homes recently Brett, and you build exclusively new homes. You don't do renovations, you're a new home builder, predominantly there. What are you currently being asked for when you are building new homes with your clients?
- Brett Bickell: Well it obviously depends on the client. Basically we go through a protocol with our clients where we're asking them to give us what their needs and wants are because that information up front is very important. But there's been a trend, for sure, towards main floor laundry room, we do build a lot of bungalows. And then things can sort of get refined after that and more detailed as far as what their needs are. And obviously the age of the client definitely plays into that to some degree too, so.
- Melissa: In terms of bungalows, speaking of that, is finding the space to build a bungalow challenging?
- Brett Bickell: Not in our community, not where we're building now. And being that people ... a lot of our customers are downsizing it's not as much of a challenge. We are building in 7000, 8000, population communities, so it's a little bit different than building in Toronto, or something like that.
- Brett Bickell: But, no, and honestly probably over the last 10 years we build about 85% bungalows. 85% are one floor, the reason for that being is because you can always finish the basement. And the resale market on bungalows seems to be a little bit better. You can open up the market and sell to a family, when you have a bungalow. But you can also sell to retirees, young professionals, and so on, and so on. So, coming from where I come from bungalows are very, very popular.

- Melissa: And in the bungalows are you getting asked a lot about universal design for instance? Like higher toilets? Anything ... like are you getting asked those questions now? Or is that part of the conversation?
- Brett Bickell: Not in those terms, necessarily, but yes-
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:26:14] Right, they don't walk in, "Hi, I'd like to talk about universal design."-
- Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:26:17] and I find that people are maybe a little bit reluctant to sort of talk about those things right off the bat. But then as the process sort of develops and you get a little bit more detail, you know, a lot of times we'll bring those items up and people go, "Oh, I could have a comfort height toilet? I can have a shower that I can basically walk right into without having to step over a curb?"
- Brett Bickell: So it's about educating our customers about those things because a lot of times when customers come in, unless they have some specific accessibility need, they haven't really had a whole lot of thought about that outside of, you know, I just ... I have trouble with stairs and I don't want to climb stairs. That's sort of the thing we hear a lot and then that turns into more and more things all the time, so.
- Melissa: So they're not necessarily thinking about what they may need in the long term,
- Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:27:09] That's right.
- Melissa: It's more like this is what I want, right now,
- Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:27:12] Yeah, yeah.
- Melissa: And fulfilling the wants, but not so much the insight or the foresight to be able to think about how long am I going to live here,
- Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:27:20] Yeah.
- Melissa: And what might I need in the future?
- Brett Bickell: Or just even what's on the market. But yeah-
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:27:24] Right.
- Brett Bickell: Like, long term and we talked about long term future, you want to be planning for, you know, well, aging in place. You want to be planning for what is your lifestyle going to be like 20 years from now? Not just right now, or next year, or the year after, right, so.

- Karen: Aging in place tends not to be a very sexy term,
- Brett Bickell: (laughs)
- Karen: So I think probably that's what turns a lot of people off, but the reality is if you talk about it like universal design or like extending the usable life of that home for the family.
- Brett Bickell: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- Karen: That also speaks to the price that they can get for it because now anybody can move into that home.
- Brett Bickell: Yeah.
- Karen: So having the vision to see not only their own age,
- Brett Bickell: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- Karen: But also the resale value seems to me to be a really important conversation.
- Brett Bickell: It is for sure. And that's a really, really good point because with the way that we build these homes now you can sort of make a universally designed house sort of blend into the landscape, make it less overt. Make it so that it looks like your everyday house until you sort of start looking closer into the details and go, "Oh, this actually is easier for me to live in." And it's a great point you make about resale because nobody's going to buy a house because it's accessible.
- Karen: Right.
- Melissa: Right.
- Brett Bickell: Nobody's going to not buy it because it's accessible I should say, so yeah, it just adds value similar to the discussion that we just had about bungalows, well, why are we building so many bungalows? Because it opens up the market. Well, if you've got a universally designed house, that opens up even more of that market, so, yeah. It's a great point. Yeah.
- Karen: Really. And are you seeing that kind of vision in consumers? Or are you finding that they really don't know how to even have that conversation?
- Brett Bickell: Yeah, there's ... they're a little bit tentative about having that conversation unless they are quite a bit older and they're sort of making a decision between a retirement home and building a small bungalow, then they sort of have some defined ideas in their head. But outside of that I think getting older is something we're all a little bit insecure about, to some degree, and our customers, young

and old are no different and so, they have some reluctance to talk about it. But really it's about having that relationship with your customer, having those detailed conversations before you break ground because action before thought is chaos, right? And so-

Karen: [crosstalk 00:29:52] For sure.

Brett Bickell: You want to have thought before action, and then you can do something that's efficient, and that works for the market, so.

Karen: Right, and what kinds of design pieces are you finding yourself building into these homes more often? We talked about the comfort toilets-

Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:30:08] Yes-

Karen: [crosstalk 00:30:08] What other kinds of things that would fall in the realm of universal design are you looking at?

Brett Bickell: So, a lot of zero barrier showers, mainly.

Karen: Yes.

Brett Bickell: Yeah, zero barrier showers.

Karen: A man after my own heart

Melissa: Yeah I love those, I love them, yeah.

Brett Bickell: Yeah. So, and there again, it takes some thought early on in the design process, to make sure that we're prepared to do those things. So, that's a big one. The comfort height-

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:30:33] Which it might be a bit more costly to dig lower and that but in the long run, I think you get what you pay for. It is so worth it.

Karen: I have to tell you, I go to Europe every couple of years and the places stay in there, that's just what they all are-

Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:30:47] Right-

Karen: And they don't think of it as universal design,

Brett Bickell: No.

Karen: They think of it as beautiful design period.

Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Brett Bickell: Yes, yes, absolutely. Yeah, ease of access. Right? For anyone. It doesn't necessarily have to do with what your skill level is with walking around.

Karen: Right.

Brett Bickell: You know, on a daily basis, necessarily. So, yeah, showers is a big one, just wider doorways, wider hallways, all these kinds of things. We haven't built anything that was zero barrier entry to the house, yet. It is something that we've been looking at in detail for some of our lifestyle home projects and things like that. But, I definitely think it's trending in that direction.

Melissa: But I think even some of the wider doorways and aisle ways, go with the higher ceiling heights too.

Karen: Yes.

Melissa: It's all part of aesthetics and design, and I love it. And the open concept, which, you know, Larry, earlier on in our podcast, mentioned that open concept was a foreign concept many years ago, and then now we want to blow the ceiling ... you know, blow the rooftops off, higher ceilings, wider doorways, all of this stuff. But it's aesthetics as well.

Brett Bickell: Yeah, and people want what they see. If they can tangibly come into a house and see for instance, a shower or whatever that is barrier free, and they go, "Oh, that's the only difference?", I think they sometimes get a little bit thrown off by the terms that get thrown around early on and get lost in the language of it.

Karen: That's our challenge.

Melissa: It doesn't look like I'm in Oz.

Karen: We got to come up with a new term.

Melissa: Yes.

Brett Bickell: Yeah, you don't ... they're concerned that it could be institutional.

Melissa: Yes.

Karen: Yes.

Brett Bickell: And it doesn't have to be institutional.

- Melissa: And it can be the furthest thing from it. Yeah.
- Brett Bickell: That's exactly right, yeah. So, like anything in life, they're scared of the unknown, and it's our job as a building community to show them the gnome and show them what we can do.
- Melissa: Last for me, Brett, you have a awesome Instagram account, you're always active on social media, and I saw the ... I believe it was the cottage that you are building, or built for your parents. What is that process like? Because that's obviously got to help you with your clientele and customers, building something for your parents.
- Brett Bickell: Yeah.
- Melissa: And knowing their needs, and then thinking about what you may want in the future as well.
- Brett Bickell: Yeah, for sure, working with family is always
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:32:54] Hey that's a whole other problem, that's a whole other problem! (laughs)
- Brett Bickell: Yeah that's a whole other podcast, right?
- Karen: Different kind of renovation.
- Brett Bickell: Yeah, well, I think with our business we've worked a lot ... because we do do lifestyle homes, we do multi-family homes, we worked a lot with, and well, the population as a whole, that 50+ market is a huge market right now, so we worked a lot with sort of that 50+ market and what they're looking for in the next 10 to 20 years and things like that. So, we've been able to pull from all those experiences while working with my parents, and others ... I've lost my train of thought-
- Karen: No, that's okay, you actually mentioned something really interesting multi-family homes that whole concept of multi-generational, which in some cultures is normal. It's now becoming more normalized for us.
- Brett Bickell: Yes.
- Karen: So you're seeing some of that-
- Brett Bickell: [crosstalk 00:33:44] Yeah, oh-
- Karen: [crosstalk 00:33:45] Request coming through.

- Brett Bickell: Absolutely. And there again, that aging ... concept of aging in place. Well somebody's downsizing from their family home and in some cases, they've lost a spouse, or they need to be able to live in a house that they can age in place and they see that as being something smaller, something that they can afford, and they're not scared to live in a multi-family situation, because then that puts them into ... and I'm sure Larry Otten can speak to this as well about, more of a community setting.
- Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- Brett Bickell: Surrounded by people who are like-minded and within a similar sort of age bracket. So we've seen we did 20 lifestyle home units in St. Mary's over the course of the last four years, and it was our fastest moving set of projects at that time, because they were just selling like crazy and so we were trying to get them built as quickly as we could and it was a great, great market for us, so.
- Karen: Terrific.
- Melissa: But I love the idea too, just in closing here, Brett, the fact that families aren't afraid to live together. Like, grandma and grandpas, you know, all that. I hate the term "Granny Suite". I don't think that should exist. Like I don't think-
- Brett Bickell: (laughs)
- Melissa: Like I think they've changed it so much now, like design doesn't have to be oh you're over here, you're here ... you know, you can do so much now and you do do that.
- Brett Bickell: Mm-hmm (affirmative)- yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, no.
- Melissa: All right. Well thank you. Thank you so much Brett.
- Brett Bickell: Okay, thank you guys. That's awesome.
- Melissa: Okay and now I want to introduce to you Courtney and Chris Teahen of Teahan Construction Limited, Plumbing and Design Group, I got it all out, but I also want to congratulate you because you are the 2019 commercial winner of the Stratford and Area Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Awards this year.
- Chris: Thank you.
- Melissa: That's a big mouthful.
- Chris: (laughs)

Melissa: But congratulations, because you have won that award not only once, but twice now.

Courtney: Yes.

Melissa: Yes. So something to be ... a huge congratulations. I want to dive in for a moment because you are not only known of your new home builds, we went through an amazing ... we went on the parade of homes tour into the home that you recently just built that's for sale. But you are known for a lot of your renovations in kitchens and bathrooms and I'm curious to know what are you asked for most often?

Chris: In the kitchens and bathrooms there?

Melissa: Sure, yeah.

Chris: Big thing I guess is as far as kitchens go, the biggest thing people are having a hard time with these days is, "Should we remove our tub from our house because if we resale somebody might want it if they have small kids or not.", but, so from a aging stand point, we're being asked a lot of the times, "Should we remove our tub, put in a walk-in shower?", which ultimately they really, really, really do want, but they are really, really holding back from doing that because of resale value and-

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:36:34] Really?

Chris: Oh absolutely. It's probably ... definitely is the number one thing we're asked for kitchen-wise, or sorry, bathroom-wise. Yeah, there's that struggle with that, so.

Melissa: So they need it, but then they don't necessarily think ... but would that not be a better resale even with kids ... well I guess you might want to give your child a bath, yeah.

Chris: [crosstalk 00:36:53] It's the bathing.

Courtney: Yeah.

Karen: But they can give them a bath upstairs.

Courtney: And that's the thing, if they have the option of two bathrooms, then they do keep one in the end, but we had one particular client who a tub was in when they moved in they pulled it out, put the shower in, the same client called us back a few years later and the tub is back in.

Chris: Yep.

Courtney: So, this happens.

Chris: It's a nice tub, too.

Melissa: (laughs)

Karen: (laughs)

Courtney: (laughs)

Melissa: Well, you build beautiful things, I would bet it would be nice. Okay, so let's go to kitchens, because I love your kitchen designs as well, one of them I know from taking tours in your home, is that you are known for your, do I say, slow close doors?

Chris: Oh yeah

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:37:28] Soft close, I got it, almost, almost.

Chris: Soft close, yeah.

Melissa: Which is a standard for you but, not a standard for everyone.

Chris: I guess apparently not, like we talked about before-

Melissa: (laughs)

Courtney: (laughs)

Karen: (laughs)

Chris: It is a standard for us because ultimately that's what most people end up going to anyways. Often we would find ourselves... we like to sort of get your wishlist off the start. And back it down. That might be a different way of looking at things than other people, but most people want the slow close, they want some of these upgraded options, so we usually start there and work down. But then, other things that we provide are like, finger-jointed dovetail, drawers, solid wood box drawers rather than a metal box or something like that.

Chris: Kitchen-wise what we get asked the most like I mentioned the detailing on the doors is actually they don't want it to hold dust, because they don't want to see it, and I guess apparently they don't want to clean it, so.

Karen: (laughs)

Courtney: (laughs)

Melissa: That's a ... well hey, so you know whose asking for that, the person that's doing the cleaning, right?

Karen: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Courtney: Right, right.

Chris: Yeah, so.

Karen: How often do you hear men say that they retire and their wives are shaking their heads going when do I get my turn?

Melissa: Yeah.

Chris: (laughs)

Courtney: (laughs) And a lot, many of the details, when it comes down to your kitchens and bathrooms, frankly, the lady of the house will often be making some of those final details, when it comes to-

Chris: [crosstalk 00:38:51] Oh, not the final details, she there right from the start.

Melissa: (laughs)

Karen: (laughs)

Courtney: (laughs) Yeah, for sure.

Chris: I look the woman in the eye, directly all the time.

Karen: Smart man.

Courtney: And it does come down to cleaning and functionality but I think what you're seeing for sure is they want the beautiful luxury items, pantries, or if they go and find the sales, to be able to buy in bulk, for sure. A walk-in pantry or at least, you know, a deep-set pantry. So the beauty, but they want the function as well.

Chris: Yeah.

Courtney: So they're thinking about having all the comforts and luxuries, but then they can clean it easily,

- Chris: Yeah.
- Courtney: And less often and that's right down to the design schematic the materials that are actually used, how much is the spaghetti sauce going to show up on the back splash, or grout, versus hide it a little longer for cleaning purposes. But still have it look beautiful.
- Melissa: Courtney and I had a great conversation when we were actually doing the Parade of Homes Tour, and you were talking, you have some European clients, so we were talking about the height of the light switches. Which I really liked because from an aging in place ... the lower switches. But you do that for some clients already.
- Courtney: Yeah, there are some clients who ... the standard here in North America is much higher. And you do technically have to raise your arm, and witch shoulder injuries or aging people, to be able to have it more at arm drop length, you know, or toward-
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:40:15] Like elbow or-
- Courtney: [crosstalk 00:40:16] Exactly. And that is very European not so much here and even when we get into L.V.T., L.V.P., your luxury vinyl plank and tile, we grout it in North America, we love our grout. And we love offsetting it, whereas in Europe that same material is butted right against, so it looks like one seamless piece of flooring. They wouldn't fathom keeping it any other way.
- Chris: And back to the electrical point of view too, is I've always found we do with most of our projects, if it's a new home or its a complete renovation, or bathroom, something like that, it was best to have it open at the stud point, have the customer come in and then say, "Okay, here's where we've marked where we would want to put stuff, or where we would see this fan switch, the light switch, the hot tub switch, whatever, like that ... what do you think? Do you want a high, low, raised?", because ultimately at that time it can go anywhere you want. It's the difference of what professionalism is.
- Melissa: That is such a great point because I know when we built our home we made mistakes, and it's electrical, so now for instance, we forgot to put in a man-door in the garage. So, and to do it now you can't because electricals all, the panels going straight across, you can't do it. So we go in through the garage doors which then I know I'm going to have to replace them a lot sooner than I would have had to had I put in that door. It's all those things. So it's so great to be able to walk ... what do you normally do? Do you walk through with the clients before it's framed up? That's a great point.
- Chris: No, we'll get it framed up usually and then we'll mark on the actual studs with a big black marker and say, "Here's what we would do if it was our house. How do

you want to change it? How do you want to customize it? Do you want to have that switch at 42? Do you want to have your fan switch beside the toilet in the bathroom?"

Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Karen: Storing the electrical, what about the plugs?

Chris: Yeah.

Karen: Do you put plugs up higher as well? Or do you get asked for that?

Chris: Oh yeah, yeah, we do for sure.

Karen: Yeah.

Chris: Absolutely. Because most people are visual.

Karen: Right.

Chris: I know I am huge, so, that's usually the best case to iron out any problems once it's finally dry-walled, finished. Then it's like, "Oh, I don't like it there because ..."-

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:42:17] And it's done and it costs more money to fix it afterwards.

Chris: Whereas, before it's just a conversation.

Melissa: But not everybody does that. Not all builders do that, that's-

Chris: [crosstalk 00:42:25] I don't know. I'm not sure if they do or not.

Melissa: You do your own thing. You beat to the rhythm of your own drum, but it's a great plan of attack because it just to me I could see it alleviates a lot of hassle. The pre-planning

Courtney: Right.

Melissa: And then the execution you execute and then, you're good to go.

Courtney: And people forget sometimes, if we're having conversations up front and I know even, a recent client, when we were coming to the finishing, and I was there cleaning that day, and we were hanging all their bathroom towel holders, and they trusted us implicitly to hang them where they should go. And then there was a bit of debate within our team where the towel hooks should go. And it

was like, "Well, it should be over here.". "Well, then they have to get out of the tub.", this was an aging person. And we said, "well, they won't want to slip and get out of the tub and there's privacy, so it should be closer to where they can reach within the tub."

- Courtney: All these conversations are happening behind closed doors, and then we did settle on where the towel hooks should be and they were very happy with it. But it's to avoid any of those problems, rather-
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:43:22] Just ask them. Come in and, "Hey, what are your habits, where would you move? What are you going to do?", it's so true. That brings up a really ... a renovation is a very personal, I mean, you're part of the family,
- Chris: Yeah.
- Melissa: For quite some time depending on the renovation. So-
- Chris: [crosstalk 00:43:38] Well, we're doing a bathroom right now, and it's the only bathroom in their house, and have small young children. She's a single mom, and her-
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:43:47] When you got to go, you got to go.
- Chris: Well, yeah-
- Melissa: [crosstalk 00:43:49] What do they do ... where do they-
- Chris: We put the toilet on at the end of the day.
- Melissa: Oh, okay.
- Chris: The tub's gone right?
- Melissa: Yeah.
- Chris: So it definitely is intrusive.
- Courtney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- Melissa: Yeah.
- Chris: So, try and make it as easy as possible. Just get the tub hooked up as quick as possible is the answer to that.

- Courtney: Well, and you tell your team, we always say, "You've been invited into someone's most private expensive asset, and you should respect it as such.". So the cleanup at the end of the day.
- Chris: Yes, monumental.
- Courtney: Even if it means putting the toilet on and off very day when you leave, and even sweeping up and polishing as if you're never coming back, but you come back every day, that we get commendation on as much as the product in the end of how our team treated their family and their home when they were there. So that I think too is a reason why people would call back for the service aspect of it.
- Melissa: Well, I'm always about like, know and trust, right? I'm always about that. That's amazing. Anything else you want to add?
- Karen: Well, I wanted to ask about how much you're getting called to do work that involves maybe a two story house, and people are now wanting to live all on one level. If you could talk a bit about that, and some of the questions you get asked, some of the challenges you face with making that happen.
- Chris: Well, right now, it ... like for instance, we are a part of other builders for a subdivision in St. Mary's and when I got asked to be a part of that group of builders my mind started going all over the place as to what I was going to build, you know, what's convenient, and I had two story ideas, this and that. We haven't built one two story there, and I don't think we're going to build a two story there at all. That's a bit of a different demographic there because it's a lot of ... geared to a lot of older people, so they want that single level, but we often have within renovations and additions adding onto homes for the master bedroom, or on-suite on that main level. Whether it's just ... we're doing one in St. Mary's right now, a little addition. It's only 12 by 12, but they just want to be on the main floor and it can often be a very inexpensive fix to staying in the home.
- Karen: Right, allowing them to stay and make use of that home for so many more years.
- Chris: Yep.
- Courtney: And something that I don't think comes quickly to your mind because you do it standard with clients that call, but having laundry on the main floor, is a huge thing. Everybody wants that. Having significant storage, so when you're coming home from groceries, where are you setting the groceries, your keys, your Ipad, all your electronics ... be it, of your children, if you're young or older, where are you putting that extra big thing of toilet paper from Costco?

Chris: Actually, that's the other thing going back to your kitchen question, about what we're being asked for in kitchens is the data hook-up.

Melissa: Oh.

Karen: Okay.

Chris: That would probably be the biggest. Oh yeah, all the USB hook-ups,

Courtney: Data center.

Chris: You know they want them, but they don't want to look at the huge mess of wires and everything that happens, so creating spaces within the kitchen it's not so much of an accessibility, but it's more of a hideaway, but that's probably one of the biggest things, is incorporating that into the kitchens.

Melissa: That's the one thing-

Karen: [crosstalk 00:46:53] That's really interesting.

Melissa: [crosstalk 00:46:53] that I find with laundry as well, is that I don't like having to walk through the house ... you're walking in a backdoor into your laundry room. And then, do you find that people are trying to get, like, to hide that? Or is it still very common to have the laundry in the backdoor, off the garage, or it depends right?

Chris: Yeah, it really does, because I think a lot of people,

Courtney: [crosstalk 00:47:11] The footprint.

Chris: They tend to still have their two entrances. One is for Friday night guests,

Melissa: (laughs)

Courtney: (laughs)

Karen: (laughs)

Chris: and the rest is for the family.

Courtney: [crosstalk 00:47:19] The family. And it depends on the footprint, and you deal with a lot of heritage homes, older homes, and specialty is making them look like they've been there forever. But they're brand new. So working with that footprint sometimes does mean that it is in an area off of the family entrance ...

- Chris: Is trickier.
- Courtney: Yep.
- Melissa: So you mentioned St. Mary's and I love St. Mary's. To me it's the next best thing ... today at our SABA PICNIK, we were talking about home designs and home trends, Paul Graham had mentioned about coming from Toronto to Stratford, and I think people then now, going even further into Mitchell, St. Mary's, and beyond Bayfield, Goderich ... St. Mary's for instance, you're building a couple of homes there right now, it's a hidden gem.
- Chris: Mm-hmm (affirmative)- yeah it is, it's a great town, both my parents were born there and raised there, and it's nice to be back there building. But, it's an amazing town. It's great. It's growing rapidly around the downtown and I think there's going to be a major change, hopefully in the downtown core as soon as well.
- Melissa: Well, and you mentioned that a lot of bungalows ... you're not, you haven't even built a two story in a while.
- Chris: No I think probably 20 homes that we just built anyways, myself and the other two, or three builders along this stretch, there's been no two story buildings ... houses at all on that stretch, so, it's all been bungalows.
- Melissa: Well, if that says anything, I don't know ... you know-
- Chris: [crosstalk 00:48:49] And actually probably, sorry to interrupt probably about 35% of those are only two bedroom bungalows.
- Karen: Really? Now that surprises me in a home. The bungalow doesn't surprise me, because you could put a family or a middle-aged couple, or a senior couple, or person, in a bungalow for sure. Two bedroom!
- Chris: Yeah, yeah
- Courtney: Yeah.
- Karen: What is ... resale value, I mean, that seems to me to speak to that.
- Chris: Well that's why I sort of mentioned earlier it's a little bit of a different demographic in St. Mary's because not all, and I'll be careful what I say here, but I mean a good portion of the people retiring in some of these homes are retired farmers, who have farmed around St. Mary's, and they're looking to move into town now. So, they don't need really a three bedroom, they might just need a two bedroom, and you always have the option of finishing the basement as well.

Karen: Oh that's true.

Chris: But yeah, so it's not uncommon. Yeah.

Melissa: But I find it so fascinating the trends are changing.

Karen: The trends are definitely changing.

Courtney: And even getting into the utilities piece, you know, having a smart home, placement of windows, I will say that on the homes that I see we renovate or build, smart placement of windows so that we're in there on many a rainy day, these days, and it is very bright, because of the smart placement of windows.

Chris: Yeah.

Courtney: And um ...

Chris: And the smartness of the home itself,

Courtney: Right.

Chris: Right down to the H.V.A.C. equipment, to the quality of your windows, to interconnectings of the communication wiring being put in homes for future as well.

Karen: Smart home technologies.

Chris: Yeah, even conduits that you might want to run when you build a new home because you may not want to put solar panels or who knows what they're going to have different in the five or ten years, but running conduits from the basement so that you can add that into your home-

Courtney: [crosstalk 00:50:40] Set it up.

Chris: [crosstalk 00:50:40] without huge costs.

Courtney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Melissa: And kudos to your team, it's always so neat and tidy down there, it's just so easy to make it-

Courtney: [crosstalk 00:50:47] We take much pride.

Melissa: Yes, thank you and thank ... and congratulations again on your business excellence award.

Courtney: Thank you.

Chris: Thank you very much.

Melissa: All right, well the party is still going strong here at Cowbell Brewing Company, for the SABA PICNIK and Parade of Homes, this was the first time we've ever done it here, and actually our first time off-location and I love doing this Karen.

Karen: It was so much fun, I really enjoyed it.

Melissa: Well and it was funny because we had a lineup of other people that wanted to be on the podcast, but that weren't builders, so we'll put them on another show.

Karen: Right.

Melissa: Where we'll talk about design trends and all sorts ... we have so many things-

Karen: [crosstalk 00:51:16] Sure.

Melissa: To chat about with you.

Karen: Such a knowledgeable group of people.

Melissa: Yeah. Well and you know what I loved about all of our builders featured today was that Brett, for instance, he builds only new home, like only new home construction, whereas you've got Teahen Construction for instance, that does a lot in renovation, they build new homes, but they are known for their renovations, so everyone brings a different element, a different piece of the puzzle to the table.

Karen: They do and across the board issues that surround aging in place and universal design are on everybody's agenda.

Melissa: So if I was to ask you Karen, what did you take away from the four builders today?

Karen: That consumers need to understand how to ask questions. That there are lots of options out there, and really that they should be looking at doing these things as soon as possible. Your 30s and 40s are not soon enough, to make these kinds of changes to your home to extend the useful life of your home for you and your family.

Melissa: And I wanted to conclude with I was going back to what John had mentioned too, about there is so much talk in the building industry about energy efficiency, its been like that for years, and right now we're in this millennial home shortage.



But I think there has to be a wave, and a time and a place, and the time is now, to start thinking, yeah, you've always said it Karen, "It's not sexy. Aging in place doesn't sound sexy."

Melissa: Hey, guess what? We'll come up with a new name for it. Doesn't matter.

Karen: That's our new job.

Melissa: Yeah, that's our new job, but we're so focused on millennials being able to be put in homes, or to be able to purchase homes, that we are losing sight, I think, of an aging population, aging community, what they need. And I thought Larry touched on it so well, how much giving them what they need in their home, will change their lives now. Immediately.

Karen: Absolutely. Absolutely agree with you.

Melissa: Well, thank you for joining us today, and if you'd like anymore information on any of the builders that we did feature today we will have them in our show notes for you. We look so forward to joining you for our next podcast of Real Life Renos.

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