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Loft-home backers no longer lying low

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Home building is essentially the same around the world and really hasn't changed for thousands of years, a Dutch architect told attendees at this year's International Builders Show in Las Vegas.

What has changed is the building materials and designs, said Lex Van Straten, architect with Thomas Alexander Design and Development.

"Floor plans and layouts have to be more intelligent," Van Straten said at a seminar on the New American Home he designed for the show, which ended Thursday and drew more than 90,000 building professionals.

"For me to look at this country and see you can build your dream house because there's so much space, that will change as it becomes more dense."

He wouldn't go so far as to say that typical layouts of homes in America have seen their last days, but there are new housing products that work better in cities such as Las Vegas where large lots come at a premium price.

The \$1.9 million New American Home, built by Las Vegas-based **Merlin** Contracting on less than a quarter acre in The Lakes community, is a trilevel, 5,180-square-foot loft house, a unique design that building experts see as a growing trend in America. The loft house services a buyer base that allows for higher densities, simple and quick construction techniques and interior design options catering to a vast range of buyers.

Ted Mahoney, an executive with WindJammer Construction in Bridgewater, Mass., and task force chairman of the New American Home, said the idea of loft homes came from old warehouses in New York and the East Coast that were converted to residential lofts.

"Somehow that was picked up in the market and lofts have now been associated with luxury types of homes," he said. "A lot of the architecture is associated with emotion and that becomes a lifestyle."

A relatively new idea in Las Vegas, several loft projects are in the works, including the Metropolis high-rise condo planned by Houston developer Randall Davis near the Greek Isles (formerly the Debbie Reynolds Hotel), the SoHo Lofts downtown and the former Holsum bread factory on Charleston Boulevard, perhaps the closest representation of an old warehouse.

Features in loft houses are dictated by U.S. cities becoming more dense and by more people working at home, Van Straten said.

"This all requires a different floor plan, a different attitude toward living," he said.

Bart Jones, financial officer for **Merlin** Contracting, said it may take a while for loft homes to catch on in Las Vegas.

"Builders are paranoid. They're not going to take that risk," he said. "If you know how to build a stick-and-stucco home and you know it's going to sell, why take a risk?"

Much of the value in the New American Home is hidden in the details behind the walls, **Jones** said. That includes a new Fiberglas drywall manufactured by Johns Manville that, unlike paper and wood products, resists mold growth.

The loft house built by **Merlin** is a custom home first and foremost, but could work at a more affordable level, **Jones** said.

"Our purpose there was to explore because manufacturers said, 'Try these products and explore.' Typically, the tract (home) people are going to catch up once they achieve economies of scale," he said.

Merlin Chief Executive Officer Steve **Jones** said the home was built with concrete, which is more sustainable than wood-framed homes.

"It's a renewable resource. We're not cutting down forests," he said. "This house will be standing here 200 years from now. Who knows about the one across the street."

The home is open for public tours from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through Feb. 15, with donations going to Boys Hope Girls Hope of Nevada.

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