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Home tour to spotlight energy savings

11:58 AM CDT on Friday, August 27, 2004

By STEVE BROWN / The Dallas Morning News

FRISCO – Will thousands of people come to Frisco to see an energy-efficient house?

Probably not.

But while they're ogling the latest gourmet kitchen designs and multimedia rooms, North Texas homebuilders hope they'll notice the technical innovations as well.

The eight houses, which are still being built in the Lone Star Ranch community on Lebanon Road in Denton County, have enough glitz and glamour to fill a dozen coffee table books.

But builders expect visitors to the three-week annual home tour to come away with more than design ideas.

"I'm going to have 50,000 people through here," said Waxahachie-based builder Jim Sargent, whose "Zero Energy Home" includes enough energy-saving features to fill a textbook. "I want to demonstrate what can be done if you build it right.

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"I want to spark people's imagination," he said.

Amid daily press reports about high oil prices, the decision to focus this year's Parade of Homes on energy savings and technology couldn't have been better timed, said Bob Cresswell of the Home Builders Association of Greater Dallas, which sponsors the tour.

"It's common sense that builders are becoming more and more aware of energy conservation and use of other building materials," he said.

The is the 13th year that the builders' association has sponsored the home show, which moves all over the area.

At least as far back as the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition, builders and architects have been showcasing their wares in North Texas with special models.

Planning for this year's event began in January, and after months of design and construction, next week is crunch time.

Looking at the block of houses going up in far west Frisco, it's hard to believe they'll be ready.

"The rain put us all so far behind," said Argyle-based builder Diane DeSimone, whose country Italian-style house overlooks a park and a lake.

Trying new things

The 3,800-square-foot, four-bedroom home has decorative tile floors, Venetian-style glass panels and rustic plaster walls.


To remind you this is Texas, there's a second-floor media room, garage space for three cars and a shower with five spray heads.

But what Ms. DeSimone is most proud of can't be seen at all.

Instead of traditional lumber construction, the exterior walls of the \$615,000 house are built with high-tech insulated foam panels that were made in a factory and shipped to the

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site. They're hidden behind rich plaster walls and the antique brick exterior.

"They fit together like interlocking tongue-and-groove and can stand up to 160-mile-per-hour winds," said Ms. DeSimone, whose Derecor Homes builds four or five homes a year.

This is her first show house, and "this was a big commitment on our part," Ms. DeSimone said. "We want people to not only see new [design] trends but where our industry is headed.

"High-tech has definitely come to this business."

The state-of-the-art features in Mr. Sargent's Craftsman style house are also mostly invisible.

There are no signs of the gadgets and gizmos, and the lush interior befits the custom house's \$950,000 price tag.

It's supposed to be that way.

"Back in the 1970s, energy- efficient houses got a reputation as ugly houses," said Mr. Sargent.

"I and a lot of other builders just put it up and expected people to buy it."

He shouldn't have any problem wooing folks to the clapboard and stone house with its grand fireplace, screened porch and richly stained woodwork.

And the buyers probably won't mind that they won't have an energy bill for much of the year.

"Sure, during the high-load periods – June, July, August – there will be an electric bill," he said. "The rest of the year, it will produce more energy than it is using."

The house pulls this trick with photoelectric cells on the roof and air-handling systems that use solar-heated and chilled water.

The list of energy-saving features in AndersonSargent Custom Builder's Zero Energy Home fills several computer printout

pages.

"I have other houses under construction in Glen Rose, Frisco and Oak Leaf," said Mr. Sargent, who builds about 20 homes a year.

"I was the first master builder the Energy and Environmental Building Association designated.

"So far I'm the only one," he said.

Opportunity

Next door, at veteran Dallas builder Bob Priest's Texas Hill Country-style house, crews were putting up light fixtures and installing the landscaping.

"The cleanup people are coming today," Mr. Priest said. "They're delivering the furniture on Saturday."

After almost 30 years of building houses in North Texas, this is Bob Priest Home's first entry on the tour.

Mr. Priest said he decided to do the model house because at \$799,000, it's cheaper than many of the homes in previous tours.

"And it was an opportunity to show what you can do building with steel," Mr. Priest said.

That's right – peel back the faux paint finish in the dining room and you'll find steel studs.

"I think we are finally at the point that we can't make enough trees," he said. "Steel is recycled. And while steel is still a touch higher than wood, there are so many other advantages," Mr. Priest said.

Besides the long-term strength of steel walls, consider that they're impervious to chewing insects and rot.

Mr. Priest says that even people who can't afford his house will find the tour worthwhile.

"You don't have to put every single feature in your house, but you can do some of them."

Folks at the builders' association admit that in previous years the price tags on the Parade of

Homes had gotten out of hand.

"It needed to be toned down a little bit," Mr. Cresswell said. "We made a very conscious decision to get the price range down."

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