

HILLSBOROUGH Homes & Classified

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Beauty, brains blend in a big way

■ A maker of mansions shoots for gorgeous yet practical and "green." You can peek at the results.

By ELIZABETH BETTENDORF
Times Correspondent

ODESSA — The view from the foyer of Jay Fechtel's latest ode to luxury deters concentration.

The temptation is to stare. Even in the midst of polite conversation, the scenery lures the eye past the Tuscan-style columns, across rugged tile floors the color of milky coffee, past the terraces and spa and "disappearing-edge" pool out to the lake, 80 acres of glistening water framed by shade trees, a dock and boat house.

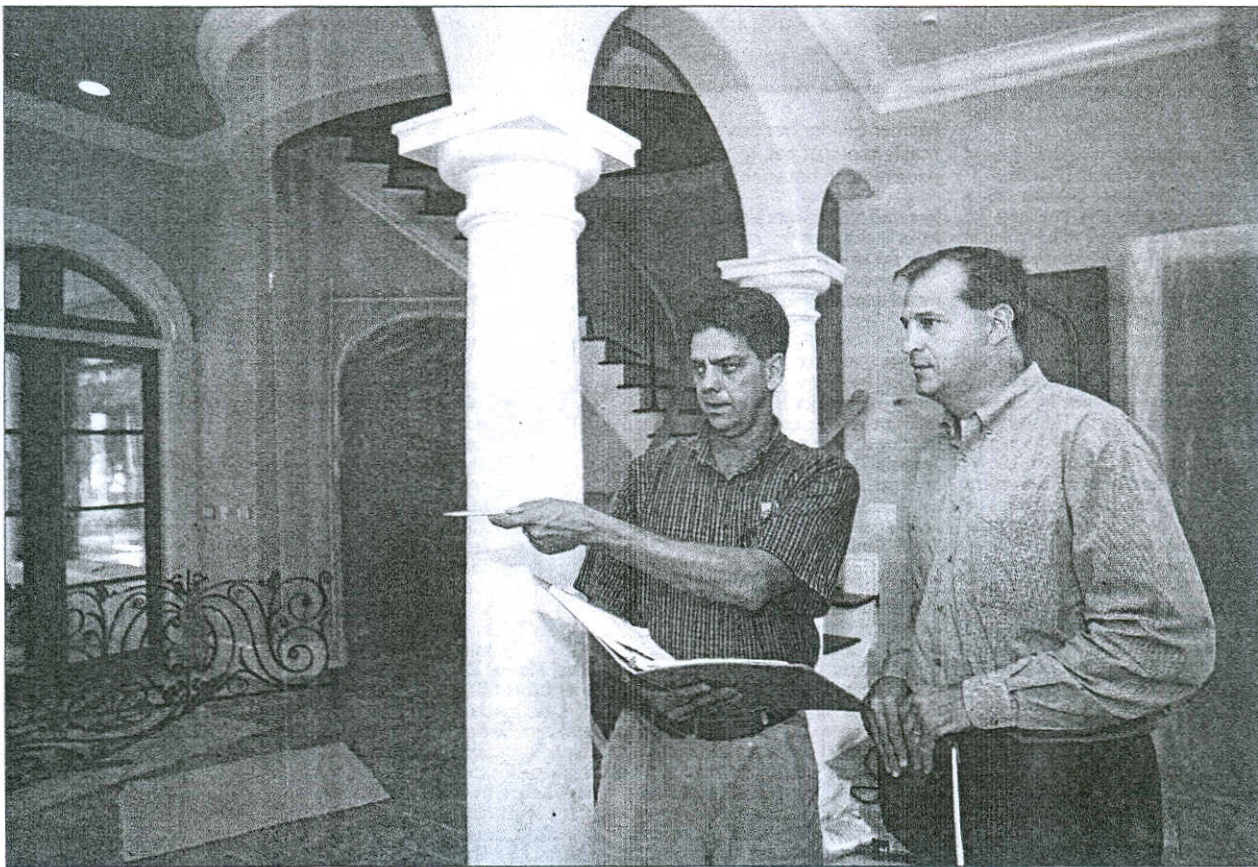
It's something out of the Great Gatsby, only another time, another place, in the middle of a pricey gated community in northwestern Hillsborough County.

Fechtel, an upscale-home builder with an eye on the environment, dreamed up what he calls his "Renaissance House" about three years ago while stretched out on his sofa in vegetative mode. He quickly sketched his ideas and the project began to take root.

"When I design, I don't like to do what everybody else does," Fechtel explains. "I want to go back hundreds of years, when a lot of creative play came into homes and buildings."

As a child, Fechtel spent a year living in a villa in northern Italy designed by the duke of Venice. The son of a former Florida state senator and a Montessori teacher, Fechtel is no ordinary builder. He, too, designs his own buildings, driven by a fascination not only with architectural frills, he says, but with deeper questions like "What's behind the walls? How do the air, lighting and electronic systems work together?"

For the last six years, Fechtel has focused on building homes that seriously conserve energy and water. Call it "green" construction, but don't expect a treehouse and hammock.



Times photo — KEN HELLE

Project manager Dave Wolcott, left, talks with builder Jay Fechtel about adjustments to the environmentally friendly and award-winning "Renaissance House" in the gated community of Stillwater, in Odessa.

With its automated "smart" lighting, state-of-the-art air-filtration system, and insulation that keeps the attic cool on a sweltering July morning, the Renaissance House is clearly Fechtel's masterpiece.

The house, which was purchased by Coby and Rhonda Orr, will open to the public as a show house from Aug. 15

through early November. Admission is \$7; the proceeds will benefit two charities hand-picked by Fechtel, Family First and the Bob Sierra YMCA Youth and Family Center.

The 11,983-square-foot estate home draws its inspiration from Italian, French and Mediterranean architecture. It is also the quintessential

"green" building: environmentally friendly, soulful on its site.

Those qualities earned it four 2003 Aurora awards from the 12-state South-eastern Builder's Conference. The awards, heralded by those in the business as the Grammys of home building, were announced last week.

"I wanted aesthetically beautiful,

practically functional and environmentally sensitive," Fechtel says. "Good art and architecture has always had an effect on the soul. But something that's beautiful to be in should also be healthy. Everything should work together."

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Fechtel, who stands taller than 6-foot-4 in his loafers, commands the presence of an old-fashioned statesman.

Salt-and-pepper hair, strong bones, straight shooter.

He may look a little like Jay Gatsby, but he's more George Bailey in temperament.

He's the kind of earnest guy who says "God bless" on his voice-mail recording and sports a bumper sticker on his GMC that says, "I Love My Wife."

His career pedigree evolved from politics, progressive schooling and business.

His father, Vince Fechtel, was a state senator from Leesburg and later spent a decade in Washington, D.C., as a federal parole commissioner.

His grandfather owned a chain of five-and-dimes in Central Florida.

His mother, Joyce Schaffer, ran a Montessori school in Leesburg for years and has worked with her son in real estate off and on for much of his adult life. These days she's selling real estate in Stillwater and keeping his appointments straight.

"He's a great colleague and son," she says.

He's building a house for her next to a new one he's building for his own family in northern Hillsborough County.

Nice guy.

He also reads to his kids every night, lately a book about explorers he noticed on the shelf while at a meeting of Christian businessmen.

A "Choose Life" license plate further hints at his ideology.

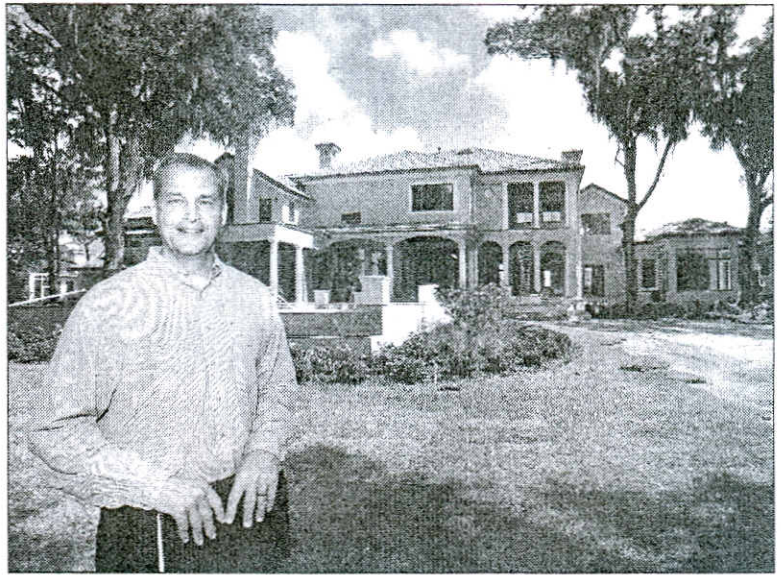
Although he won't say never, he's not dunking into the roiling political waters right now.

His four kids — all homeschooled by his wife, Terri — keep him busy enough.

So does business. A builder in the Tampa area for the past 15 years, Fechtel turns out eight to 10 custom homes a year. The range is vast: from 4,500 to 10,000 square feet.

He declines to say what the Orrs paid for the custom construction. They bought the 2.5-acre site in 2002 for \$675,000, property records show. Fechtel's homes typically fetch \$1- to \$4.2-million. Stillwater, the 114-acre luxury community that has been in development since 2000, has 22 lots left out of its original 48.

The interior of the house, which fans out on many levels, will be fully furnished and professionally decorated for the upcoming tour. Visitors will be able to see a kitchen with appliances disguised in woodwork that looks like antique furniture, its stain-



Times photo — KEN HELLE

Neither builder nor buyer has disclosed the price of Jay Fechtel's masterpiece of nearly 12,000 square feet, but his creations usually fetch between \$1-million and \$4.2-million.

less steel refrigerators hidden in what looks like an armoire.

In the kids' rooms, look for built-in bunk beds and hidden play spaces that tunnel through the walls. The enormous marble shower in the master bath features enough seating to house a meeting of ancient Romans. The walk-in closet is as big as some studio apartments in South Tampa.

Fechtel scattered details like gold coins: niches for pottery in the hallways, double-barrel arched ceilings in the dining room, walnut-colored tile floors coaxed to look like they've weathered centuries of footsteps.

Overall, the house is as warm as cinnamon toast on a chilly morning.

"You'll notice there aren't gigantic, soaring, two-story ceilings," Fechtel says. "We've tried to bring the scale down so that people feel comfortable and relaxed in the space."

The real message of the Renaissance House, though, isn't immediately visible.

Fechtel and Dave Wolcott, his project manager, lead visitors through a 20-by-4-foot ribbon of space concealed in the home theater room. Hidden inside are the brains of the building: wiring for the phone and security systems, for computer networking, for audiovisual technology.

In the attic, Fechtel points out one of his favorite features: Icynene insula-

tion. It looks a bit like snow peaks, but in fact seals "the envelope" of the house, keeping it cool and dry even in the hottest months.

"Basically, we call this an upside-down boat," Wolcott explains. "It's our motto. We don't want leaks, we don't want moisture, we don't want mold."

Wolcott, who has worked for Fechtel for over a decade, is typical of most of Fechtel's employees. They stay with the business a long time.

On a Monday morning that echoes

with the din of construction, Manuel Carvajal cleans tile in the kitchen. Employed by a local tile business that has been with Fechtel for a dozen years, he clearly feels at home with his boss, patting him on the arm, chiming in on the conversation.

"When you're working, it's easy to say, this doesn't matter, it's for some other person's house," he says. "But not with Jay. I feel like I'm doing something important."

And why not? Consider Fechtel's mission statement, neatly tucked in a press packet and handed out to reporters:

"To bring honor to God and have an eternally beneficial, life-changing impact on people by striving to be the finest custom building team we can be and by genuinely reflecting the character of Jesus Christ."

Fechtel puts it simply:

"God's direction for me is to serve my clients and my family."

If you go

The Renaissance House opens to the public Aug. 15. Viewing days are Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. The cost is \$7 per person, \$15 for a family. For directions or more information, call (813) 926-8899