

Mimi Kress, Phil Leibovitz, and Richard Mandell

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Sandy Spring Builders
www.sandyspringbuilders.com

Bethesda, Md.

Type of business: custom builder

Years in business: 25

Employees: 21

2004 volume: \$20 million

2004 starts: 10

“When a builder considers razing a home in an established neighborhood, it is important that they assume the responsibility of replacing it with one that justifies its removal.” That is Sandy Spring Builders' tactful way of saying, “We don't just work in the pressure-cooker housing market of the Washington, D.C., suburbs. We live here, too.” Hexing a local neighborhood with an ill-considered house might hurt their reputation as builders, but it would definitely make cocktail parties awkward. So, while the company offers no in-house design services, it stakes out an unusually forward position in the design process. “We don't just turn it over to architects,” says partner Mimi Kress. “Most of the time we're guiding a client to an architect or architects, based on a couple of factors.” Those include the owners' taste, budget, personalities, even their proposed schedule.

Phil Leibovitz, the company's sales and marketing honcho, pins down these variables with a series of preliminary design meetings, house tours hosted by prior clients, and a “development questionnaire” that works toward balancing clients' desires with their budget.

Mandell, Kress, and Leibovitz (left to right) don't design the houses they build. But they make sure their clients get the best design possible, for themselves and their neighborhood.



The company has enough experience with land acquisition to tell a client, as Kress says, “If you want to be at \$1.2 million at this location with this level of finish you can't have stone and Douglas fir on the outside.” The builder-client team arrives at the architect's door, therefore, with a significant jump on the design process. And Leibovitz stays involved, attending architect-client meetings and providing cost feedback to keep the design process from wandering off the buildable track. “We also bring interior designers in early on,” says Kress. “We're big on the team effort. The No. 1 difference is the level of personal involvement with the owners. We're just hands-on.”