

## House Proud

Lew Oliver, an Atlanta home designer, wants his plan book, the Garden Houses of the 1920s (examples below), to be among the top-selling designs nationally within five years. His Craftsman-style homes are gaining in popularity but higher construction costs and a risk-averse building industry pose significant obstacles.



Georgetown

Amberley Hall



Lew Oliver

### A Look at the Home-Plan Industry

- Annual industry sales: \$80 million
- Annual plans sold: 150,000
- Average plan price: \$450
- Average plan size: 1,800-2,200 square feet
- Estimated plans available: More than 10,000

\*September 1997 survey of home-plan industry professionals

Sources: American Institute of Building Design; industry experts

### Top-Selling Home Styles\*

1. Farmhouse/Country
2. Contemporary/Transitional
3. French/European
4. Colonial/Early American
5. Federal/Georgian
6. Spanish/Mediterranean
7. Victorian

# Home Designer Pitches Whole New (but Old) Look

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ATLANTA—Lew Oliver has made a good living designing high-priced custom homes for the country-club elite. But for the past year, the 38-year-old designer has been turning down those lucrative jobs.

Instead, he has spent much of his time drawing up a book of 1920s-era designs that he's betting will be the next big thing on the housing scene. Mr. Oliver is trying to shake up the \$80 million business of creating stock building plans for homes. For years, this so-called home-plan industry has had a reputation for decades-old, cookie-cutter homes. Mr. Oliver wants to sell classic designs that emphasize quality materials and craftsmanship.

In a business where a designer's creativity is rarely rewarded, the odds are against a new look becoming a best seller. But industry experts say Mr. Oliver's Garden Houses of the 1920s, his adaptation of the Craftsman style, has a chance to shape tomorrow's neighborhoods and make him a household name.

"Lew doesn't have a big name yet but he will," predicts Stephen Macauley, an At-

lanta developer who hired Mr. Oliver to design a development in suburban Atlanta near Kennesaw Mountain. The Ridenour project, which won a design award earlier this month from the Atlanta Regional Commission, will feature up to 40 of Mr. Oliver's new homes. "People will be saying, 'I've got to get a Lew,'" says Mr. Macauley.

The typical home-plan purchasers are generally people who cannot afford a custom home and architectural fees that run in excess of \$10,000. So they buy a plan for about \$450 on average and then take it to a builder. Home builders also purchase these stock plans on their own.

The housing boom over the past decade has attracted a growing number of designers and distributors to the stock-plan industry. In the rush to serve consumer demand, industry executives say, design quality has suffered. "It has watered down what the consumer sees," says Brad Kidney, chief operating officer at Garlinghouse Co., a leading home-plan publisher based in Middletown, Conn.

Mr. Oliver's strategy is to pitch nostalgia to the masses. His yet-to-be-published

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