

THE SUITE



BORN TO BUILD

EastBay Builders' Jim Naples reflects on his 40 years in the building trade, why he still loves the challenge, and the state of the art today.

by Ed Krug

You might say that Center Moriches' Jim Naples was born with sawdust under his fingernails. Not only was his father in the commercial building trade, Jim's marriage to his William Floyd High School sweetheart brought him into another Long Island building family.

In fact, it was while working through school and during summers for his future father-in-law Charles H. Calson that he became interested in residential construction. Jim's Dad and older brother, union carpenters, mostly in construction of commercial construction lead Jim to join the carpenter's union. Bitten by the design bug, he decided to study architecture. Juggling work, school and a growing young family to do so. "At a certain point though I realized that I could make a lot more money as a union carpenter than working as someone's apprentice architect," he says, and left school to go back into the construction trade. For good.

After a few more years as a carpenter, a job in Waldbaum's corporate engineering department was the young construction manager's trial by fire, giving him the confidence to go out on his own. "It really taught me how to work under pressure," Naples says. In 1980, with a few early clients and "through some lucky breaks," EastBay Builders was born.

The firm was launched with remodeling and renovation jobs, which remain Naples's favorite type of challenge, despite the dozens of ground-up custom homes from Nassau County's Gold Coast to Montauk he has completed. "New construction is easy when you've been doing renovations – you get a set of plans, and you build it. With renovations you never really know what you've got until you start." Even today, many of EastBay's projects are renovations and historic restorations.

Naples credits his architectural training, knowledge of the market and solid grasp of building costs for the way his business developed. "Clients know they can come to me and say, 'I've got a budget of a certain size to spend renovating my house—what can I do

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for that? ‘Should I put a second floor on?’ or ‘What do I need to do and how much do I need to spend to make this house saleable?’ They know they’ll get an honest answer.” EastBay has a roster of architects that it engages to realize the vision that the homeowner and Naples develop.

It’s a similar kind of collaboration with new homes. “I love to come into a project at the beginning, to be brought in by the architect and homeowner as a trusted construction advisor during the design development phase. That way, we can make sure that the right design choices are made at the outset to not only satisfy the client’s wish-list, but bring the project in on budget.”

According to Naples, this type of collaborative process engenders strong, lasting relationships with clients and the architectural community, and explains why 80-percent of EastBay’s business is referred by previous clients or architects. “Good relationships and reputation are everything,” he believes.

Another reason clients come to him is the strength of his team, which now includes his son, Jim Jr. as General Manager. EastBay has also taken the unusual step of building in-house capability for site work, usually subbed out to others, keeping tasks like grading and utility connections under tighter control. It is the quality of his tradespeople, though, that Naples is most passionate about. “I don’t shop for the trades for each project like some builders,” he says. “I have my team.” He feels that having a strong working rela-

tionship with a core team of framers, masons, plumbers, painters and others who understand the level of quality and customer care he wants to achieve has been key to EastBay’s success.

So, what has changed in 40+ years of being in the construction business? “First, clients are smarter. With so much information available to them on the internet, they are more engaged.” Naples also feels the influx of foreign-born master tradespeople on Long Island in recent years has raised everyone’s game. “I have the most talented crew I have ever had—they are masters.” **{S}**

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Photos courtesy of EastBay Builders