

# Independentspirits

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Photos by John M. Vincent

The word "Craftsman" means more than an architectural style to four Portland-area builders who embrace the risks and rewards of working on their own. It also means a style of workmanship they strive for in each house they build.

They are independent builders who have come to the house-building craft by various routes. Richard Kassebaum owned a landscaping business and spent time in Alaska operating a sport-fishing business. Rick Bernard earned college degrees in psychology and landscape design. Guy Bryant started out selling real estate. Dennis Myers worked as a finish carpenter before he and some friends struck out on their own.

Though their backgrounds differ, their philosophies are similar—they enjoy being intimately involved in crafting each house, from designing a home that fits the contours of a specific lot to turning the key over to the client at closing. Such personal involvement means they only produce one to three projects per year.

Still, it's an independent lifestyle each builder says he wouldn't give up.

"I feel really lucky," Dennis Myers said. "I have a job where I can do any phase, from shoveling gravel to designing. It's really stimulating. Each site and each client are different. It allows me to have a rich variety of projects."



"I would probably get bored building the same box every day," said Richard Kassebaum, pictured above in the kitchen of a home he's building in the Mount Tabor neighborhood.

## Richard Kassebaum, Kassebaum Construction

For most of his career, Richard Kassebaum has gone it alone, first owning a landscape business, then moving to Alaska with his family to launch a sport-fishing endeavor. But when Alaska's remoteness became too much to bear, Kassebaum returned to Oregon and began remodeling old homes, then selling them. He would split off the lots to sell to developers until he realized eight years ago that he could build homes on those lots himself.

He began buying lots in areas that supported smaller "starter homes" but eventually moved on to neighborhoods with upscale Craftsman-style homes. "I always try to build something that fits the neighborhood," Kassebaum said. "Building something different than the neighborhood doesn't work."

Kassebaum, 49, finds he must be creative when he searches for scarce infill lots or homes on large parcels in Portland's established neighborhoods. The perfect lot, he said, provides enough space for two or

more row houses that blend with classic Portland homes, such as those he is building on Southeast 71st Street and at Southeast 76th Avenue and Harrison Street in the Mount Tabor neighborhood.

His previous projects have included homes at Southeast 55th Avenue and Ash Street and homes in the Boise-Elliott neighborhood in North Portland.

Being an independent builder requires taking a lot of risks, Kassebaum said.

"I am constantly trying to figure out a way to maximize the land and create a product of value, and I'm always creating a new product," he said. "It takes someone willing to go beyond the usual house."

It takes about two years from the time the land is purchased to complete a house, and the stretch between paying expenses and bringing in an income can be precarious, he said.

During the building process, Kassebaum focuses on getting the details right.



# Kassebaum

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"I always think about what the customer would want," said the builder, who works with interior designer Erin Marshall. "We analyze each room and ask 'can we put a couch or chair or bookcase here? Where do we put the windows?' A lot of time is spent analyzing how the customer is going to live in the house."

Marshall, owner of Kismet Design, said she was impressed with how Kassebaum "very much cares about doing a good job."

"He takes a lot of pride in his work," she said. "He's really open to new ideas."

Clients respond well to his designs, Marshall added. "He has to attend to a ton of details. He has to customize every single one of his plans. Extra details — like more windows and finer materials — don't get into 90 percent of standard plans."

Before they were finished, the two row houses on Southeast 71st Avenue required the usual decisions from Kassebaum, who con-

siders questions that range from how large a porch should be — "so someone can put a chair there and enjoy a summer evening" — to how many skylights should be installed to fill the house with natural light. "I love having light coming into my home," he said.

Each new site presents a problem to solve. When city planners denied a garage in front of the houses on 71st Avenue, Kassebaum had to rethink his design. He decided to put the garages in back, under a deck. Each garage opens to a basement room that is plumbed for a mini-kitchen and could serve as separate living quarters.

The completed 2,100-square-foot, three-bedroom, 3.5-bath row houses with two master suites and maple kitchen cabinets are each priced at \$379,000.

Like other Kassebaum projects, a second pair of row houses under construction on 71st Avenue feature Craftsman-style details such as arches over front entries and dining room

entrances. The kitchens in the 2,500-square-foot homes have movable islands, along with solid-wood cabinets, laundry rooms big enough to double as a crafts room or playroom and large windows reminiscent of turn-of-the-century Portland houses.

As with their counterparts down the street, each row house also has a finished basement that could be used as a separate apartment.

The three-bedroom, three-bath homes, expected to be completed by November, are priced from \$429,000 to \$439,000.

Although he is forever solving problems, Kassebaum said he enjoys the creative demands of being an independent builder.

"I would probably get bored building the same box every day," he said. "This has been quite a learning curve."



Richard Kassebaum, right, looks over the stone being installed by Pat Bernard of Bernard Masonry in front of a home Kassebaum is building on Southeast 71st Avenue in Portland's Mount Tabor neighborhood. Wanting the home to fit in architecturally with its long-established neighbors, Kassebaum sweated the details such as a classic-looking front door, above left, and an Old Portland-style arch between the living and dining rooms.

