



every moment counts

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Colleen Edwards, home building expert, works to meet needs for future buyers

While for some, each work experience is used as a tile or lock creating a path which leads to the next project, Colleen Edwards, a home building industry expert, also layers those blocks of experience to lift her up and enable her to gain a better perspective of how home building can be improved and better meet the needs of tomorrow's buyers.

And what she sees are smaller neighborhoods, plus more and more "green" concepts being integrated into new home communities as well as a transition to "healthy home" features that embrace a wider definition of quality of life.

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Colleen Edwards of EMC

Commenting on this time period when homebuilders have dramatically slowed their projects and delayed some indefinitely, she is confident that great benefits will come in the future as the builders carefully examine their past practices and their plans for the years ahead. Her collaborative efforts with homebuilders have given her a positive perspective about the future of home building, not only in California but actually in many corners of the world.

"Builders won't come back [in the months and years ahead] with the same old 'stuff'," she said. "They are taking time to figure out what buyers really want. And they are rethinking how they build homes, not just how to build more cheaply," she said.

Particularly in California, where Edwards has focused most of her attention over the past few

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decades, she finds the builder community “is more focused” and looking beyond the homes to the complete neighborhood environment. This new focus means that land plans for new developments are carefully crafted with an eye to green living and quality of life.

Today’s master planning incorporates walkable neighborhoods with community gathering places as well as natural open spaces, she observes. Lots may be smaller than traditional ones of past years, “but we’re changing the definition of ‘your backyard’,” she said, by adding community parks and other nature features.

In newer neighborhoods there are multiple parks, there are trails for bicycling and walking, there are many features that encourage an outdoor, recreation-oriented lifestyle. School playing fields become joint-use fields, for example, so that more athletic events can be enjoyed in an area, promoting sports for players of all ages. For example, Edwards notes the Windemere community (with homes built by Brookfield, Lennar and Centex) in San Ramon, where the builders and developer teamed to create new schools with playing fields that are used during the school day as well as on the weekends, with city support for their maintenance.

And “open space” in a land plan...“it’s okay that it’s natural, not landscaped,” as the hills that ring Windemere attest, Edwards noted. Small neighborhood parks provide settings for active pastimes — games, running and play equipment — as well as social gathering spots for parents and grandparents.

“It’s a return to a small town setting,” she observed. She predicts that more and more developments will locate schools within smaller residential neighborhoods, encouraging parents and grandparents to walk to children’s schools instead of loading the youth in the car for a ride to school. “It’s just healthier,” she added. Walkable neighborhoods also encourage socialization between neighbors and enhance the daily experience.

Windemere did it — the land planners and the developers worked hard to help redefine the concept of neighborhoods and community. Others are following suit, both in the few undeveloped areas left in Northern California, as well as in areas that can be modified for a new purpose.

For example, at Hunter’s Point in San Francisco, land planners and developers are assessing

the former military property, looking to repurpose some of the old buildings and “blurring the edge between old and new,” according to Edwards. The master planner, Lennar, has embraced the concept of mixed-use areas, she said.

“This [mixed-use] concept is filled with potential. It’s a 24-hour clock, not just a commute time or a school day.” People don’t just come home at night and go to sleep. Neighborhoods should reflect that, Edwards believes.

At Hunter’s Point, that means preserving the artists’ community which has occupied parts of the area for years while also building retail and residential areas. She predicts that future buyers will be “blown away” by the possibilities that the land planners and architects bring to life.

“People often don’t even know what’s in their own backyard,” Edwards said. They haven’t seen the bases and will likely be surprised at the many beautiful elements that exist in areas such as former bases — wide spaces, beautiful views, proximity to other attractions.

While builders await a better economy, they are focused on the future, and how they can better serve their buyers, offering convenient and mixed communities with a variety of services — schools, libraries, retail, transit stations and green or open spaces. Many of the same principles are being followed in infill housing projects as well, she reported. “Infills are by nature ‘green,’ because [such developments] are smaller neighborhoods, close to commute and job centers and encourage people to get out of their cars,” Edwards said.

Add in the new materials being used in construction and these developments are great for the environment and for the residents.

“All homebuilders in the Bay Area are aware” of the possibilities for change, “and are starting to integrate new thoughts, ideas and perspectives in their plans,” she said. “It goes beyond the four walls and roof,” she said.

“This slowdown is allowing builders time to test drive their ideas, to really plan carefully for future developments,” Edwards added. “Buyers of the future will have even higher expectations and I believe builders will really deliver.”

Neighborhoods which encourage social interaction among residents, and opportunities for enjoying the outdoors also will likely integrate more green features in the building of the homes themselves. Edwards likes to term it “healthy homes” instead of the narrower focus of “green homes.”

This thinking “embraces the concept of healthy building materials because buyers are not only interested in energy savings, but in ‘what’s the quality of life for my family?’, she predicts. This includes healthier paints, carpeting, flooring, ventilation options, as well as elements that insulate, provide passive heating or cooling, or make homes easier to maintain. And builders in the Bay Area are increasingly working with groups such as BuildItGreen and other programs which rate a home’s green features as well as its health, probably more so than many other areas around the country.

“Green is the norm now, and the buyers of green homes are generally more satisfied — emotionally and intellectually, they want their home to be healthier.”

Many developments in the Bay Area are seeking or have received good ratings from BuildItGreen (builditgreen.org). Ratings factor in healthy materials as well as use of recycled or sustainably harvested wood, water and energy-saving practices and the features of a complete neighborhood as the norm, she believes.

Colleen Edwards is a co-founder and CEO of EMC Creative, Danville, a communications and marketing agency that has, for nearly 30 years, worked closely with homebuilders, master-planned communities and land use development companies. She has been awarded the Lifetime Legend Award by the Homebuilder’s Assn. of Northern California and is in the California Building Industry Assn.’s Hall of Fame. In recent years, she has worked with builders and architects to research and develop housing projects in such destinations as China and Europe.

