

Remodeling in Focus — Michael Mills Construction, Inc.

by Judith Wellner

The Aptos-based Michael Mills Construction company has been in business for three decades renovating homes from bathrooms and kitchens to additions and restorations.

“We do a wide variety of remodeling,” said Michael Mills, founder of the company. “We have been remodeling kitchens, bathrooms, adding cabinets. We also do a lot of more structural things, like room additions.”

Better yet, homeowners can also count on Mike for help with design ideas and estimates, taking a lot of the guesswork out of home makeovers.

From Start to Finish

“Once somebody calls us and says that they have a house to remodel, either I or our designer ... will go out and have a look at the whole situation and figure out what [the homeowners] want,” said Michael.

The next step is to develop a plan for the job, including all the specifications. For instance, what would be replaced or where wall extensions would be built. Michael’s designer will also help a homeowner decide what materials they want to use — tile versus granite or wood shingles versus concrete tiles.

“Sometimes things have to be flexible because there are always unseen [issues]. But we try to be as realistic as possible with the estimate and work with our clients’ budgets,” said Michael. “We’re not trying to do more than what they can afford.”

After the plans are documented, it is time to write up a contract. Michael believes it is very important to include everything in the contract that was part of the plans so that

both parties can see clearly what the job will entail.

“It is essential that we have it as clear as we can,” he said.

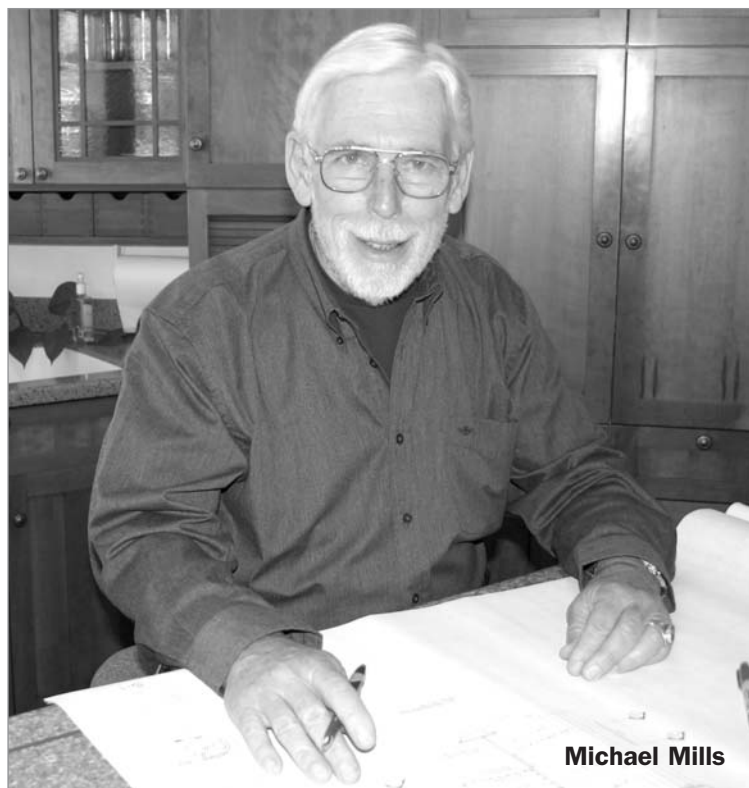
The company has its own crew, which handles a big chunk of the construction work.

“We have about 10 people out in the field [working various trades],” said Michael.

The company has a cabinet designer on staff, but they can also provide clients with interior design support.

“The more people can tell us about what appeals to them, the more we’ll be able to help them,” Michael said. “It’s a real fun process to try and work out the details.”

The company has a show-



Michael Mills

Over the years, the company has also worked with a number of sub-contractors. Most of the time, Michael chooses who he would like to work with based on recommendations, and he looks for sub-contractors he can work with in the long term.

“Many people always take the lowest bid. I want to take the best bid,” he said. “I would like to work with people who are responsible and stand behind their work. For me, that’s very important.”

From Cabinet Design to Picking Drapes

Michael explained that when it comes to choosing products, they like to make sure they meet their clients’

room as well to help customers.

“We are the local carrier of DuraSupreme,” said Michael. “They have all kinds of cabinets, hundreds of colors, stains, different door styles. You can do anything from French country to a super-modern look.”

Michael says that each client has different needs, and different tastes.

“We have a wide range of clients from all ages and financial situations,” he added. “Right now, for instance, we’ve got a deck we’re doing for an 86-year-old lady.”

He emphasized that for older people they pay a lot of attention to making houses more accessible.

“When we can avoid stairs we do. For lots of us as we’re getting older, good lighting is very important,” he said. “We also build wheelchair accessible baths and kitchens.”

Last year, Michael Mills Construction won two prizes at contests organized by the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI).

“We won in the category of designing a kitchen under \$30,000, and also kitchen under \$60,000,” said Michael.

The company also pays careful attention to energy use. Michael obtained a certification as a Green Building professional.

“Green building means so many things for different people,” said Michael. “It’s not well defined yet.”

Still, most people believe to be green a house needs to be energy efficient.

“We look at the house as an overall system and try to figure out how to make it more efficient,” he said. “We can, for instance, replace an old, leaking furnace with an energy-efficient one.”

Michael added that choosing energy-efficient lighting, using good insulation techniques or installing double-glazed windows can also save a lot of money and energy.

The Man Behind The Doors

Michael, originally an economics major, got into the industry by first building his own house. “I used up all my money for that, so once it was done, I needed something to do to make some money,” said Michael.

He started to do finish work for a developer in the area, then got more and more involved in remodeling, and soon people started asking him to work on their houses.

“I began doing it because there were people who wanted

me to do it,” he said.

Michael emphasized that remodeling is very different from construction.

“When you’re building something new, you know what you are dealing with,” he said.

Remodeling a home is its own industry.

“But with reconstruction, you never really know what can be behind the wall. I found it more challenging to work in the reconstruction area,” he added. “I seemed to have a fairly good knack for diagnosis and figuring out what needs to be done.”

Michael has worked almost exclusively in Santa Cruz county.

“I don’t see any point in going over the hill. It’s much harder to supervise the work that way,” he said.

Once his own house was done and he established his business, Michael started hiring help. When the business grew enough that it needed full-time administrative help, his wife, Opal, joined the company. Her son, Ken, also came on board and started to work for Michael Mills Construction as a carpenter. He gradually worked up to greater responsibility.

“Now he is doing all the operations, seeing that everything gets done,” said Michael.

With the business in good hands, Michael was planning to retire, but in the end he couldn’t leave.

“I tried to retire a few years ago, but I’m back. I’m trying to take more time away. I’ve got grandchildren, even a great grandchild. But my workers seem to want to have me around.”

Michael Mill’s Construction is located at 402 Trout Gulch Road in Aptos. For more information, you can call 831-688-8997, or check out www.michaelmillsconstr.com.

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