

Alta Verde homebuilders bring a poet's perspective



At far right Andrew Adler, CEO of Alta Verde Group, and Anthony Poon, architect for Poon Design Inc., are photographed at a home developed by Alta Verde in Palm Springs.

Dominique Fong, The Desert Sun 6:37 p.m. PDT May 3, 2014

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PALM SPRINGS – For Beverly Hills developer Andrew Adler, it doesn't matter if it's three in the morning, he'll jot down any bold idea. An urban loft-turned-house. A box with pure white walls.

"It's not like we have this brand that's a stamp, and they go, 'Oh, that's what they design,'" Adler said one afternoon as he shuffled layout designs on a sun-lit table. "It's enlightenment. We think it's like an expanding philosophy as we're trying out new lifestyles and new theses."

Adler, chief executive of Alta Verde Group, describes the firm's three housing tracts in the desert like a poet. One community faces rocky ridges that resemble an Indian resting on his back. Another has pagoda-tiled roofs that shade the high ceilings of a zen-like living room.

"It's not just art for art's sake, but it's art as an experience, so you have to really adapt it," Adler said. "You can't just say, here's a piece of static art. Come look at it in any place, like a museum or a house, and if you like the art, you can put it there. This is a piece of art that has to adapt to nature."

His design partner, architect Anthony Poon, nodded.

"This is an art that people live in," said Poon, head of Poon Design Inc. in Beverly Hills. "That is architecture."

Alta Verde Group burst into the desert this season with its modernist designs built for the masses — a nod to the Eichlers and Alexanders from the midcentury. As new construction and building permits pick up, few other homebuilders beside Alta Verde make midcentury modern architecture such a core part of its layouts.

Clean lines, flat roofs and indoor-outdoor living also lace the designs of Sol Palm Springs, OCEO Palm Springs and Murano Palm Springs. But Alta Verde pegs its success on a unique partnership between a bottom line-driven developer and an architect.

There are three main Alta Verde projects: Escena, with 130 modern homes near the Palm Springs International Airport; Monte Sereno, a hub of 60 Italian farmhouse-inspired homes south of Palm Springs; and Coral Mountain, a core of 70 Bali-California desert resorts in La Quinta. Some lots are still empty, planned for future homes.

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"We love midcentury, but it has been the same as if it's been embalmed," Poon said. "(Our design) still respects the legacy of Palm Springs. ... It's not like we just come in with alien homes and drop things in. It's still working with respect to history."

The industry has noticed. Alta Verde swept national homebuilding design awards recently, including one for innovative architecture for the blend of global Bali design and iconic desert modernism at Coral Mountain, and another for reimagining mid-century design at Escena.

"As far as Alta Verde goes, they are building a unique product," said Gretchen Gutierrez, chief executive of the Desert Valleys Builders Association. "It's stylized to go with the communities they're in, and they're able to do that with the midcentury modern stuff. They view it not as a cutting-edge type of architecture, but more of a stylized type of architecture."

The niche buyer

Like other homebuilders, Alta Verde has zoomed in on a niche buyer: second-home and move-up buyers who are affluent, well-traveled and sophisticated.

"Rather than just designing for a homebuyer, we believe that if we do it right and do a great home, a homebuyer will appreciate that and buy it," Poon said.

Prices don't run cheap for Alta Verde's high-end homes. Coral Mountain ranges from \$700,000 to \$800,000 for three-bedroom, 2,800-square-foot houses. One Monte Sereno model runs as high as \$1.7 million for a grand 4,200-square-foot, four-bedroom home.

But there is a growing group of buyers, many from out-of-town, who desire the midcentury-inspired design of Palm Springs.

In February, Charles Larson and his husband from Laguna Beach visited the three-bedroom "Modern Villa" model at Monte Sereno. Within a month, they bought an empty lot. They're selling their home in Laguna Beach and can't wait to move into Palm Springs.

"When we did go to look at it, (we were) impressed with the fit and finish and quality of construction and attention to detail," Larson said.

When Larson retires this year from a real estate career, he's looking forward to new friends and community. "When we walked in that house, my first reaction was 'Yeah I could live here,'" he said.

A bold idea: Cubist homes

A home could be drop-dead gorgeous. But Adler still has to sell it.

So Adler steps into the mind of the buyer. He and Poon obsess over the way sunlight moves from east to west over a home, where rays shine through the window, where shade falls on a table.

"I have to have as much passion as he does," Adler said.

Alder, Poon and the Alta Verde team are working on a fourth project in Palm Springs. So far, they're in the early stages of a big idea: all-white, cubist homes.

"We're not looking at these things to mimic or to copy and say, 'Oh, maybe we can bring that to the U.S.' It's usually for us, inspiration," Poon said about Asian and European architecture photos they saved for research.

Poon pulled out transparent sheets of sketches and engineering plans from a large folder. In the planned project, 4,300-square-foot homes are pure white boxes. There are no columns to break the flat space of wall and glass. Every room and hallway lies along an exact axis, designed to guide your eye down a long hallway to an anchor on the end, such as a fire pit.

"It's a very rigorous exercise," Poon said. "If you're off a little bit, you might not notice right away, but you walk through these homes, and there's something not quite right and you don't know why. It's because someone didn't have the discipline."

After an engineer trims the sketches to exact dimensions, Adler and Poon play with tiny walnut-sized paper cutouts of the layouts. They move red, blue and yellow puzzle pieces on a map of the home project, fidgeting plan types this way, that way. "Oh, we do it for hours," Poon said, chuckling.

Alta Verde expects to break ground on the white cubist project next year. It will be the first project from scratch, instead of from adapting to a plan abandoned by another developer during the recession.

"This is a little more of an artist statement," Adler said. He grinned. "I have to have my fingers crossed, a little more, you know what I mean."

Alta Verde Group

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Coachella Valley communities:

Escena, Palm Springs, "This Century Modern," midcentury modern homes, 130 lots

Monte Sereno, Palm Springs, "Mission Modern," Italian farmhouse-inspired homes, 60 lots

Coral Mountain, La Quinta, "Cali-Bali," global resort homes, 70 lots

Information: www.altaverdegroupp.com

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