



Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald

Verna Leask is president of Valadar Design in Partnership, which specializes in custom designs for baby boomers looking to maintain a sense of style in a smaller home.

Good design stands test of time, space

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CALGARY HERALD

As baby boomers begin the long process of slowing down, they are starting to appreciate the finer things in life, particularly in their homes.

Filling this need for some Calgarians is **Valadar Design in Partnership**, a small company that specializes in quality custom design work, classic styling and a consultative approach.

"Our process is very collaborative, and we really get to know our clients very well," says Verna Leask, designer and owner of Valadar, "so that when our job is done, they absolutely love the space they're in and the space they are in will function for a long time."

After graduating from the University of Manitoba with a degree in interior design, Leask worked on the **Petro-Canada** building before jumping between architectural firms, design firms, the university and, finally, a furniture outlet.

She started Valadar, under a different name and composition, in 1985, but didn't make working on her own a full-time move until 1994. Valadar has been operating since 2001.

"I was looking for more challenges and more creative outlets," she says of the transition.

Her business focuses 90 per cent of its energy on residential work, most of that on renovations. The majority of Valadar's clientele are baby boomers looking for a change, downsizing their homes after the children have left, or seeking something different.

"They're looking for something smaller... but they would like it appointed to the same level as these high-end homes that they came from," says Leask.

Focusing on long-term design and livability is a key element, says Leask.

small business

Valadar Design

- Current employees: 3 full-time, 2 part-time
- Sales: projected over \$1 million gross for 2007
- Operating: about 16 years

"I'm looking at it for someone in their 50s, but designing it so if they choose to stay through their 70s or 80s, the space still functions," she says.

This means attention to details, like hallways capable of accommodating a wheelchair or walker and bathrooms on different levels of the house.

Planning for decades of living in the home, Leask also concerns herself with quality finishes and accessories.

"We'll go in with finishes that are going to last a lifetime, that don't have to be replaced," she says, preferring to work with "natural materials that age over time, but age in a beautiful way."

Appliances are chosen that last 20 years and beyond.

For Leask, quality work is not enough: the design that goes into the home must also have an extended shelf life.

"We don't really deal so much with trends, we deal more with classic kind of design, because good design stands the test of time," she says.

There is no doubt this is a very good time to be operating a high-end interior design company in Calgary, since with the strong market comes an increased appetite and ability to pay for finer surroundings.

According to Leask, even middle-market homes are now being renovated with luxury finishes and appliances because

it no longer makes sense to simply sell your house and move into something high scale.

"Before, we would do kitchens that were \$50,000, and now we will do kitchens that are \$150,000," she says.

Valadar has always been a small company, now operating with three full-time and two part-time employees, but with a fluctuating roster that may see as many as eight people working at the company, depending on the project load.

Leask says she has no inclination to expand the size, either, preferring the hands-on approach and working with customers on their designs rather than managing personnel.

Though finding office staff is not a problem, Leask has encountered trouble with contractors in Calgary's thriving economy.

"It's taking longer to project manage jobs; the schedules are taking much longer because the trades aren't there to do the work," she says.

However, Leask says that during her extended consultation with her clients gives her a chance to secure trades before the project begins, a benefit, she says, of working with a designer.

For prospective customers, Valadar will be opening a living show room, planned for December 2007. Doubling as Leask's house, the show space will feature all the design principles of a Valadar home, with long-term living in mind.

It will also showcase what can be done with an existing inner-city bungalow.

While interior design is the staple of Valadar, the company also does displays and event design and planning for private and corporate clients, as well as facilities management.

"Because we're small, we can easily fit into these pockets in the market that shift all the time," says Leask.