

Homes built to stand out by blending in

By ANGIE PARKINSON

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ST. GEORGE — J.D. Thompson may sometimes play the part of an aesthetician, mediator, environmentalist and leader in Southern Utah, but above all he is a contractor.

And as a contractor, Thompson incorporates all of his roles into the way he builds homes. Best-known for his work in the Ivins development Kayenta, Thompson decided early on that he had a responsibility to create homes that would not conflict with the environment in which they were built.

Years ago, Thompson was impressed by the home of some friends in Italy. The house was 750 years old.

"At one time somebody just like me — a builder — was building that home and that house has outlived him by many generations," said Thompson. "That kind of stuck with me. If we do a good product that thing's going to outlive us for hundreds and hundreds of years."

At that point he made a decision about the types of homes he builds: They will be built to last and they will complement their environment.

Thompson has been a contractor in the St. George area for 15 years, now. He began building houses while he was still in college. While he was studying art and zoology, he built houses during the summer.

After college, he spent a couple of years selling real estate. Thompson then moved to California and began to work for a contractor. Eventually he got his contractor's license and began building.

First he built homes in California, then in Montana.

He moved to St. George to get away from the chilly Montana winters. He has been changing the face of St. George ever since.

When Thompson first began collaborating with developer Terry Marten on Kayenta, the homes were destined to be built in a fairly traditional southwestern style. But Thompson helped convince Marten to go with a much less obtrusive, low-profile style of home for the development.

Today, the 60-plus homes Thompson built in Kayenta virtually disappear from the road.

"You tell people how many



Nick Adams / The Spectrum

A long driveway curves up to the home of J. D. Thompson. The design, with its stone exterior and steep roof angles, is decidedly European and a departure from the Southwest style Thompson is best known for in St. George.

homes there are in Kayenta — and there's over 150 homes in Kayenta — people just don't believe it," said Thompson.

That is no accident.

Thompson believes in designing homes that fit their setting in every way. In Southern Utah, that means using colors that blend in with the earth. There are fewer trees in the area than in other parts of Utah. Building a three-story, white home in the desert does not make sense to Thompson.

"You have to build things that fit in the desert," said Thompson. "It's so important to use the right colors."

Thompson has actively tried to convert other builders to his way of thinking on the subject over the years. During his two-year run as president of the Southern Utah Homebuilder's association, Thompson lobbied to fellow contractors and even the St. George City Council about making responsible color choices for exterior paints.

When fellow contractors disagreed with him, Thompson reminded them of one thing.

"It doesn't cost any more to use the right coloring on that house," he said.

Although reluctant initially, area contractors have slowly come around to Thompson's way of thinking. More and more St. George-area homes are being built with exteriors that blend into their settings.

Each year, Parade of Homes entries look a little less like the homes of northern Utah and a little more like Thompson's homes — homes that seem to emerge from their environment rather than being flung on top of it.

Creating homes that blend with their environment is much more than a habit or passing fancy for Thompson.

"I think it's a form of environmentalism," he said.

Thompson believes that property rights come with responsibilities. He does not use cheap materials or shortcuts. His homes are filled with the most durable stone and wood. Many of the doors and moldings in his houses are specially designed and made by Thompson's company.

Since his homes will be on the earth for generations to come, he wants to make a good impression.

"He's not just into building the houses and hoping it works in 10 years," said architect Ray Jones, who collaborates with Thompson on a regular basis. "He's hoping it still works in 100 years."

Thompson goes to great lengths to make homes he can be proud of.

Unlike some contractors who take the architect's plans and simply go about their work, he likes to be involved in the design from the start. He works with the architect, interior designer and plant designer to get things right.

"You get the synergy, and you come up with better ideas than any

one person can come up with on their own," said Thompson. "So I try to involve as many people as I can."

Although completely different from the homes he built in Kayenta, his own new home in St. George is far from being a towering white eyesore. The home was designed to fit its environment.

Thompson said he never wants to stagnate in his home-building style. He is continuously trying to stay one step ahead of trends.

His homes share the common threads of blending with their environment and using natural materials but in other ways they are completely different. One element remains the same — comfort.

"That's always been my philosophy — to make a house really feel like a home so people come in and they really feel good and they want to stay there."

Thompson has built more than 200 homes in the St. George area, including homes in the Palute, Entrada, Kayenta and Stone Cliff developments.

The house Thompson built in Entrada this year for the Parade of Homes was admired as a masterpiece. It was recently featured in Utah Homes and Garden Magazine. The home had an exterior made completely of stone and wood. It featured a negative edge pool and a floor plan in which every bedroom opens onto a patio.

It was a far cry from his Kayenta homes, but many of the elements were the same. Like all of his homes, it fit its desert setting.

Carol Sapp, executive director of the Southern Utah Home Builder's Association, said Thompson has been a leader in the arena of desert developments. His work in Kayenta was the first indication of that.

"I think he was one of the leaders in the beginning in making that type of environmental setting livable and pleasing," said Sapp.

Sapp said Thompson has a knack for taking what homeowners want and translating that into building materials.

"He builds things that are not just squares," said Sapp. "It takes creativity to do that; it's more than just pounding nails."

"He has been an asset both to the association and to home-building in the area," said Sapp.