



“Building Communities - Not Just Homes”

By Ann-Margret Hovsepian
Photo by Mary-Ellen Nealis



Scott Hill (right) and his brother Darren build houses as a team.

Scott Hill started learning about real estate and building long before he took any business or engineering courses. Now senior consulting engineer at Hill Bros. Realty & Investments Ltd. in Fredericton, New Brunswick, he and his brother Darren used to have lunch at their grandfather Hazen's house when they were young boys. Every day, they listened to him talk shop with their father Wayne, who is now president of the award-winning company.

Recalling the lunch time discussions about deals, Hill says, "Darren and I understood more as we got older and participated in the conversations. I went on to get an engineering degree and Darren got one in business." They brothers eventually came back to lead the family business with Darren, vice president, focussing more on field operations of construction and looking after the crew while Scott takes care of the engineering, office, design and problem-solving work.

In 1951, Hazen and his brother Raymond sold their original business, a wholesale food business, and retired, "but they got bored, they were still young and they had some cash," says Hill, "so they took up real estate. That's what the company is today." Starting small, the senior Hills got more heavily involved in real estate in the 1970s, especially residential development, though they also sold commercial properties. "Home building is our core business," says Hill. "In the next 10 years, you might see the commercial component of our company take over, but home building will always be our bread and butter. It's much easier to sell a house/lot package than just a lot. I learned that philosophy from my grandfather, and it's still true today."

Though the company's overall focus is steady on energy efficiency, quality construction, value and convenience, Hill says they study the ever-changing market to determine what the needs and wants of home buyers are. "We choose an area where we have land - or purchase land if we need to - design some subdivisions and start building homes. The first year of the development is always a bit slow, but then it takes off." He adds that the company often continues developing near those properties. "We try to stay in one area for as long as possible."

The Hills like to build traditional homes: one, one-and-a-half to two storey houses. "That's our style," Hill says, "and we're well known for that. We build a higher end home, which is also our trademark." He explains that their houses are not really for first-time buyers, but rather people who are into their third or final house. This is the market the Hills are catering to.

Standing Out of the Crowd

"When you buy a home from us, you're not just buying a home," Hill says. "You're buying into a planned-out community. We've been around a long time, so you know we're going to be there in the future. People feel comfortable and they tell us that's an important factor in their purchasing decision." He adds that the quality of their homes, as well as their customer service - something Darren prides himself on - have given them a good reputation. "We've been told that our homes tend to come in at a better price for future resale. As for customer service, we'll go beyond home warranty program and that gives people peace of mind."

The awards Hill Bros. has won speak to the builder's growing reputation. In 2003, the New Brunswick Home Builders' Association named Hill Bros. Builder of the Year. A year later, the company picked up an NBHBA award for Energy Efficient Builder of the Year (single-detached). Among other awards, Hill Bros. received a 2006 Development Award by the City of Fredericton for the design of the West Hills Subdivision, a master golf course community that will encompass about 450 acres with a planned 15-year build-out. "We're totally focussed on this right now," says Hill of what will be Atlantic Canada's first R-2000 subdivision.

Hill Bros. has evolved from the early 1990s into a company that now builds only R-2000. "We specialize in that," Hill says, adding that customers are offered a complete package that includes design, engineering, and construction services. "If someone comes to us with an idea, we can make it a reality because of our in-house engineering and design capabilities." Hill explains that in the 1980s, most builders used stock plans but started to get into custom work a decade or two later. "Everything is custom now," he says.

Market Changes, Pricing Challenges

One of the challenges Hill Bros. faces is the changing marketplace. "There's a lot of demand for townhouse and condos," says Hill, pointing to demographics for the shift away from larger homes. "Pricing is getting high and some people don't want to spend that money; they want to downsize. We're going to have to adapt our building to more multi-unit style and also try to keep our prices down."

One bright spot in all of this is the one per cent reduction in the GST last summer. "That had a positive impact for us and helped on the pricing." Another big announcement for New Brunswick is a recently-introduced energy efficiency rebate for homes, confirming for the brothers their commitment to build R-2000.

Hill Bros. is also moving toward becoming more of a multi-faceted operation. Hill says: "When my grandfather started in real estate, it was pretty straightforward: buying land, developing it, building houses, selling houses. Since the '90s, we've played with the commercial market a bit and that's getting stronger for us. A golf course operation is commercial, but it's a complement to the housing. It all ties together for one place for people to live: housing, recreation, commercial."

Community is certainly a high priority for the Hill's family. "We made a decision in 1995 to buy a family cottage," he says. "We go almost every weekend. We have fun, talk a little business... by being together in positive atmosphere, it's good for us when making decisions. Besides the education and courses, the experience I gained from those lunch meetings at my grandfather's house was invaluable." **HB**