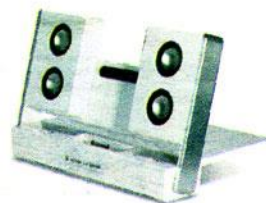


careers



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JOBS, THE WORKPLACE AND PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

It's not child's play building Lilliputian-scale houses for a living

BY JAN TYLER

Scale models of Christmas Village panoramas and landscaped toy-train layouts are guaranteed showstoppers. One would have to be a Grinch not to think of those Lilliputian-size buildings as just plain cute.

Accurately scaled models of real houses have a similar universal appeal, but the payoff of the mini mansions is measured in dollars as much as smiles. For architectural professionals whose career is model building, scale models serve as design tools that not only can nail down clients' perceptions of how their house will actually look but also can save thousands of dollars, not to mention wasted time. For the architect, they serve as a kind of insurance against client misunderstandings.

"It's a lot easier to reshape a facade made of matboard than a built wall of bricks and mortar," said Gary Lawrance, 46, a master maker of draft models built to a scale of one-eighth-inch to one-quarter-inch per foot. His works are used by many Long Island architectural firms as presentation pieces for client approval and are required by certain architectural review boards.

Visualizing in 3-D

Architects know that when it comes to visualizing how a blueprint or line drawing of a floor plan mentally translates into a three-dimensional structure, there are two kinds of clients: those who can and those who can't. Even for clients who can envision how the lines on paper will become solid structures, many

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Architects, from left, Bob Ortman and Greg Zwirko with model maker Gary Lawrance and his model in front of the Hamptons home it preceded.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / KEN SPENCER

Model citizens



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Building model homes down to scale

DISPLAY from E44

architects say that the floor plan is never enough. "I had one client who said she was completely happy with her plans; we'd even had a model made," says Locust Valley architect Greg Andrea. "But when the house was under construction she insisted that an overhang was too wide and we had to rebuild it."

Backing the floor plan with draftsman's elevation drawings may help but, "the emotion just ain't there," Andrea says.

And so, architects are prompted to assign staff members to build cardboard models, a time-consuming task that takes them away from more technical work. Many prefer to outsource the job to specialists like Lawrance.

Enjoying the craft

A full-time, freelance model maker, Lawrance set up his Stony Brook studio soon after he earned his bachelor's degree in architecture at New York Institute of Technology in Old Westbury 25 years ago. He turns out 40 to 50 projects a year.

"I found I enjoyed the process of the craft more than the process of designing buildings," he says, "and because I'm a licensed architect, I sometimes can pick up on flaws in colleagues' designs that show up in the model but aren't so easy to spot on the blueprint."

Lawrance works from architects' blueprints using simple tools like X-Acto knives, T-squares, straight edges and Elmer's glue. He sets up his models on plywood bases that he landscapes with appropriately scaled trees and shrubs made of twigs and moss or purchased from an architect's supply catalog. He often dresses up the presentation with figures of people and dogs as well as cars, fences, fire hydrants and mailboxes.

"It's like building a whole little world," he says. A model can take from a few weeks to several months to complete depending on the complexity of the design. Models are often treated as works of art that are kept in the home under glass cases.

Lawrance's minimum fee is \$2,500, but models with intricate detailing can cost many thousands more. "I try to make them as realistic as possible," he says.

"The model was unreal, exquisite," says Michael Lamoretti of Kings Point, who adds that he was skeptical when his architect, Brian Shore of Locust Valley, first proposed commissioning a model of Lamoretti's new home, then on the drawing board. "I didn't see why I would need one."

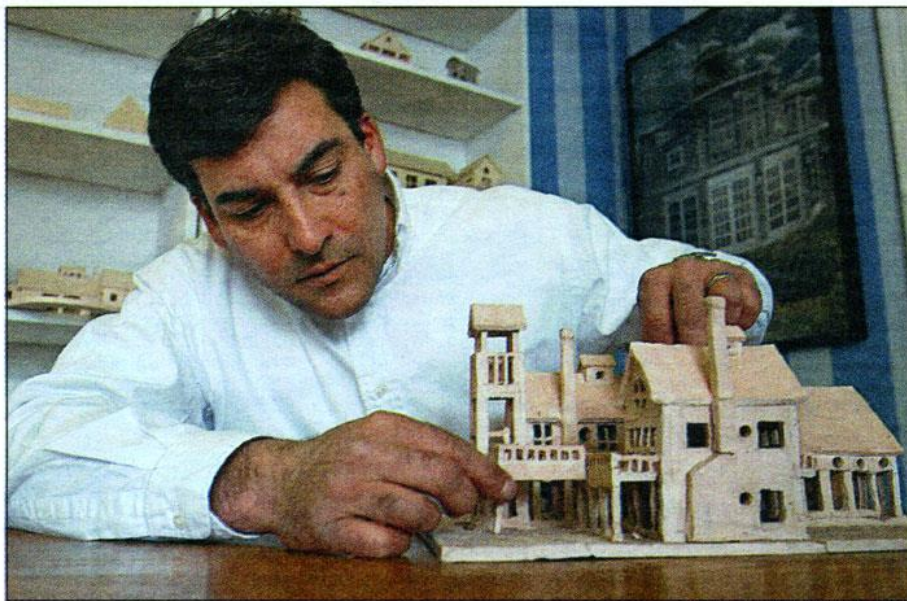
A commercial real estate investor, Lamoretti says he is used to blueprints, "but the model was so detailed, it was easy to see things like the size of the rooms, how the windows would look, how the rooms would relate to each other; it was the next best thing to being right there." And, he adds, there were some modifications, such as a change in the roof pitch, that were minor at that design stage but would have cost "a fortune to change" or been ignored after construction was under way.

Andrea has his own take on model making. He handcrafts them of kiln-fired, glazed clay creating a permanent alternative to the somewhat flimsier matboard examples. "It's a hobby that I enjoy," says the architect, whose collection fills floor to ceiling shelves in his office despite the considerable number he's presented to clients.

Conventional model making is included in four-year architectural degree programs. "Students start with stick structures which look like dowels stuck into Styrofoam bases but are intended to teach relationships to space and volume," says Amit Handyopadhyay, professor and chairman of the architecture de-



Tim Maldonado, right, professor at New York City College of Technology in Brooklyn, and his students discuss the architectural model for the Metrotech District in Downtown Brooklyn.



At his Locust Valley office, architect Greg Andrea repairs a ceramic model of a home he is designing in Amagansett. Andrea makes his models of kiln-fired, glazed clay.

partment at Farmingdale State University of New York. "They are taught how to create increasingly complex cardboard structures as they work through the program."

But he adds, "While the models are very useful, they're being overshadowed more and more by computer assisted design, both fixed and animated."

Computer displays of floor plans and elevations are easily adjusted for anything from ceiling heights to window placement to room sizes, tasks that

used to require endless and costly redrafting of blueprints.

Creating a virtual house

Animated design is a fascinating example of computer technology. It takes the viewer into a movie-like walk through a structure both inside and out. And this is a house that's little more than a gleam in the architect's eye. The software, which can cost \$4,000, required input of dimensions and materials, which the computer assembles into a virtual house.

But, says Tim Maldonado, professor and chairman of the architecture and technical department at the New York City College of Technology in Brooklyn, "I never do a house, or any architectural project, without a model." In fact, he adds, he makes progressively detailed study models that help to refine his final concept of houses as designs for his private practice. Maldonado credits his students with creating models of complex cityscapes such as the Metrotech District in Downtown

Brooklyn and the Tudor City restoration on Manhattan's east side, both of which, he says, were instrumental in raising community awareness — in easily understandable three-dimensional terms — of the architecture's impact on their respective areas.

Great Neck architect-artist Richard Baehr practices another method of getting a structure's image across to the client. In his 45-year career, his startlingly realistic acrylic paintings called renderings that some observers describe as "photos" of buildings that aren't there have caught the eyes of such real estate moguls as Donald Trump and Levitt & Sons. Like models, renderings are mandatory presentations for some architectural review boards. Baehr's fees are \$3,000 to \$5,000.

"I get a lot of pleasure out of taking the most rudimentary of architect's sketches and developing them into color renderings that bring the buildings to life," he says.

But the satisfaction prize must go to Gary Lawrance who says, "I'm the only architect I know who laughs when a chimney gets knocked over. I just get out the Elmer's and glue it back on."

Jan Tyler is a freelance writer.

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