

REAL ESTATE

HAROLD BUBIL, REAL ESTATE EDITOR, 361-4805, harold.bubil@heraldtribune.com Sunday, November 6, 2011 SECTION I

INSIDE

■ TAMELA WISEMAN: Board needs to know how much owners are getting for unit rentals. 2-1



HAROLD BUBIL
LETTER FROM HOME

Beyond the trends of the day

One of the benefits — there is at least one — of preparing a house for sale is that one gets to go through a lot of personal belongings that perhaps have not been seen for quite some time.

For me, that would include a lot of treasured old books, many of them having to do with history, sports and architecture — my three passions.

I do not get to write about sports anymore (since 1981), but I do delve into local development history and home design on these pages. Judging from reader reaction, many of you do not mind my indulgences in this area.

One book in particular caught my eye during the clean-out. I bought it about 15 years ago at Restoration Hardware in Tampa's Hyde Park, which was a popular place to shop for home accessories that look as if they were made 70 or 100 years ago.

The book is titled "Aladdin 'Built in a Day' House Catalog, 1917." It is a reproduction of a World War I-era book of house designs by The Aladdin Company of Bay City, Mich., that one could order from a catalog.

A couple of things become apparent from reading this book:

■ **In 1917, a dollar was real money.** Houses in this book that would cost nearly \$1 million now cost about \$3,400 back then. A lot of the kit houses in the book cost less than \$1,000.

■ **Quality and efficiency never go out of fashion.** The book makes a point of emphasizing that materials are not to be wasted, efficiency is king, and technology should be used where necessary, instead of hand-crafting, to assure quality and the lowest possible cost. In 1917, that meant using power tools. Measurements were standardized to reduce the waste of materials.

■ **The designs are timeless.**

When I first read this book, I asked a prominent local builder if such houses, which look like what we now call the craftsman bungalow, could be built today. He answered that it would not be practical and would not meet the demands of the market. But soon after that conversation, "New Urbanism" took hold and pre-World War II architecture became popular again, both at suburban planned communities such as Celebration, Fla., and for infill projects near urban centers. And vintage homes in historic districts became increasingly valuable.

Builders now are using modern materials, floor plans, technologies and fixtures, but are constructing houses, such as Josh Wynne Construction's Coddling Cottage on Laurel Street in Sarasota, that have the charm of old design but the sustainability of new green construction.

And such designs are not the domain of high-end housing. Neal Communities has made the retro cottage an artform of affordability in its developments, such

See BUBIL on 41

ONLINE PHOTO GALLERIES: There is more to see of Villa DeVita than we can show you here. Find a photo gallery online at heraldtribune.com/galleries. You also will find galleries of our popular Market Snapshot feature from the Saturday Real Estate section.

After six years on the market, Venice's massive Villa DeVita awaits just the right buyer from an increasingly shallow pool of candidates



House of life



TOP: Ultra high-end Sherle Wagner sinks with gold handles in "her" bath suite in Villa DeVita, Venice. ABOVE: Putting the "great" in great room, this vaulted space is for formal entertaining. The oversized twin sofas are the centerpiece of the room. STAFF PHOTOS / HAROLD BUBIL



ABOVE: The kitchen of Richard and Colleen DeVita's expansive home.

RIGHT: Calling this a refrigerator is like calling the Queen Mary a boat. It's a commercial grade cooled vault in Villa DeVita, which is on the market at \$13.5 million through Signature Sotheby's International Realty.



By HAROLD BUBIL, Real Estate Editor

Everything about the property near Jacaranda Boulevard in rural Venice is big — 19,100 square feet of house, a big guest house, a big stable, a big barn, a big pool and 101 acres of meticulously maintained land, neatly divided by wooden fences, not a plank in disrepair.

Inside, the main house, among the five biggest in the region, echoes Cà d'Zan, the palatial home of John and Mable Ringling in 1920s Sarasota. The fixtures, finishes and furnishings are that impressive. If John and Mable had ever had children, they would have lived like this: a mural of cherubs painted on the ceiling of the girl's room; enough technology to launch a career as a record producer in the older boy's room; a farm motif, complete with a mural of a rural landscape, in his younger brother's.

The master suite is right out of the Ringling pattern book, with a signature bed, and his-and-her bathrooms that are big enough to get lost in. His closet looks like the one in the 1974 movie "The Great Gatsby's" shirt-tossing scene, except bigger and neater. Hers is a showplace with gold inlays in the onyx tile and gold faucets on the ultra-high-end Sherle Wagner sinks.

These rooms, along with a home theater with a "concession stand," wood-paneled library, exercise suite and a kitchen that would make Emeril Lagasse swoon (and, in fact, he did, when he visited the house with a crew from ABC's "Good Morning America" on Valentine's Day, 2006), surround a grand hall that, once again, is right out of Ringling. It is 35 feet tall with massive stone fireplace, oversized sofas made for an invasion of relatives, and a Steinway grand piano that seems almost too small for the space — all topped by dark timber beams and a cedar ceiling.

The entire ranch is for sale at \$13.5 million through See DEVITA on 121

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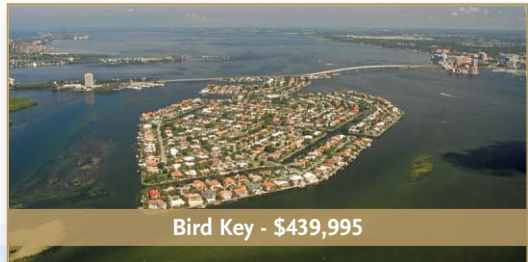
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Decor that brings Ringling to mind

DEVITA from 11
Carol Clark of Signature Sotheby's International Realty.

On the outside, it must be said, the house is not to Ca d'Zan's ornate standard, although it is nearly as large. But one of its many visitors shared with Clark, "I think this may be the most beautiful house in Sarasota County." That visitor has seen a few; she is Darla Furst, longtime real estate agent and wife of Sarasota County Property Appraiser Bill Furst.

"It's a great property," said Clark. "It is one thing to buy it. It is so hard to find the right person who will fall in love with it."

The house's supersized real estate, though, is hardly the story. All that bigness and grandeur is eclipsed by a love story that has played out within its spacious walls over the past eight years. It is a story that defies convention. Unique, maybe not? But highly unusual, most certainly.

It is the story of Jackie and Richard DeVita, who built the house in the early 2000s, and enjoyed it for three years before she was diagnosed with brain cancer. Three years after that, just before she passed away, Jackie instructed her sister and best friend, Colleen Leary, to care for her children. Colleen and Richard, who had known each other for 18 years because she had worked in his Sarasota dental office, married three months later.

"It's a home," said Clark. "It's about family, it's about kids coming in and getting a snack. The house is warm. It is cozy, not just a showplace."

"Villa DeVita" — House of Life — is the kind of mansion that only the select few could consider. The price tag is exclusive enough. But a buyer also must have a passion, and a budget (property insurance is \$25,000 a year, the electric bill \$1,500 a month), to appreciate and maintain 101 acres of meticulously kept horse farm.

All that is missing are the horses. Currently, the owner keeps 42 head of cattle within those perfectly straight pasture fences, where you will not find a loose nail or a flake of peeling paint.

Richard DeVita acknowledges that it takes more than just his income as an endodontist to build and maintain such an estate.

"We had a lot of luck with real estate," he said. They sold for a Siesta Key record price a large waterfront home they bought and renovated, "just when things were getting real good."

"My wife, Jacqueline, and I... I don't know how we came out to here, but we came out, and it was pretty much overgrown. The house was pretty much a shell; there was some drywall in a couple of rooms, and the other buildings were deteriorated. Because of the land, it struck our

fancy, and she saw potential. I thought it was a mess.

"In 2000, we bought it and started building, taking it down to block, putting new roofs on each building. We started with the guest house, because we had to live there while we did the other buildings."

Richard and his crew, headed by Tony Delgado, landscaped, bringing in thousands of trees and planting them with his own farm equipment.

"The only thing that was here when we got here were the big oaks. Every other bush and plant we did," said Richard.

"That was his vision," said Colleen DeVita. "It was all sand and weeds. He was out there every weekend doing all the landscaping with the guys."

Meanwhile, Jackie handled the interior décor.

"She had no experience with any of that," said Richard. "What she did was just get magazines. She had a vision; she knew what she wanted. I would try to get things built, without a contractor. We started with a contractor but that went sour in two months."

Through it all, the emphasis was on quality. "We figured if we were going to do it, do it right," said Richard. "We had some carpenters who were outrageous, they were great. The carpenters and stone guys were here every day from 9 to 5 for three years."

Clark, the DeVitas' Realtor, runs her finger atop a hutch in the 1,000-square-foot kitchen. It comes off clean.

"I couldn't do that in my house," she said, crediting the DeVitas' head housekeeper, Maria, and her assistant for keeping every inch of the house immaculate.

Richard DeVita knows that only a select few buyers could even consider buying DeVita Ranch and Villa DeVita.

"And it is getting more select every time the stock market closes," he said in August, when Wall Street was on a roller-coaster — still ongoing.

"It is just more than I want to manage right now," he said.

"We have parts of this house that we don't use. In a week we don't go into some of it."

"It's definitely a house for people who like to entertain," said Colleen.

"And I'm not a social guy," said Richard.

"We do a lot of family entertaining, holidays and such. It's great for that," added Colleen.

"This past Easter we had my entire family from New York," said Richard. "We had 14 or 15 and fed them all in the kitchen. There was plenty of room for them."

"We will have to find our buyer," said Clark. "We are ready. He has been so loyal — you don't see a lot of sellers stick with a Realtor for five or six years."

"But it will happen."



FROM TOP: Villa DeVita has 19,000 square feet of air conditioned area and is listed for \$13.5 million through Carol Clark of Signature Sotheby's International Realty; the lady's dressing room in Villa DeVita; a mural depicting angels on the ceiling of Gabby DeVita's bedroom; a commemorative plate drawn by Chef Emeril LaGasse in the kitchen of Richard and Colleen DeVita — on Valentine's Day 2006, LaGasse and ABC's "Good Morning America" visited the home to make breakfast in bed, televised, for the late Jackie DeVita as she fought brain cancer; the master bedroom in the DeVita home in Venice. STAFF PHOTOS/HAROLD BUBIL



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