

Witt Construction's award-winning entry in the 2003 Saratoga Showcase of Homes . . . Saratoga Farm.

"The Showcase gives us a chance to experiment with our design creativity, integrate new ideas and install products that our potential customers may not have seen before."

— John Witt

Saratoga's Design-Builder Witt Construction, Inc.



STORY BY CRAIG STEVENS
PHOTOS BY RANDALL PERRY PHOTOGRAPHY
(unless otherwise noted)

It was early in 1993. I had written three or four articles about builders for a new regional trade magazine. One of my related tasks was to determine who would make good subjects for the magazine's readership. Real estate publications and newspapers made it fairly easy to learn the "household names," i.e., well-established, mostly volume-oriented builders. It was not so easy to identify the better smaller-scale and, in particular, the "up and coming" younger builders.

I can't recall whether I was buttonholed at a builders association meeting or received a telephone call. Whichever it was, a well-established contractor made a point to tell me about a young builder whom he thought had begun a surefire journey to success. He talked about this builder's creative eye for design and his commitment to excellence. He said this "up and comer" didn't merely want to build houses, he wanted to build a reputation for building extraordinary houses. And he said he could arrange an introduction.

Thus I came to meet John Witt at his nearly completed personal residence on Autumn Lane in Saratoga Springs, New York. Autumn Lane is a pretty, wooded cul-de-sac. It sits atop a ridge overlooking a creek that feeds Saratoga Lake. My first thought was that either John Witt was lucky or knew how to find a nice piece of property. At the time Autumn Lane contained three or four homes. Together with a handful of others scattered about the area they constituted John's entire production. There would be many more to come.

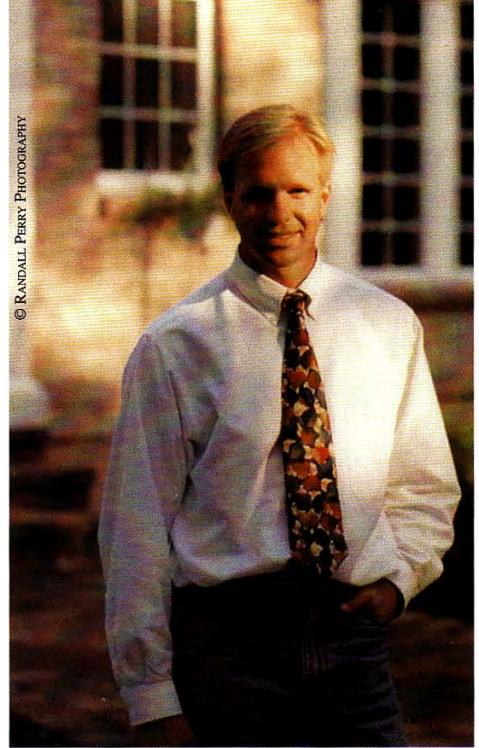
John and I conversed over a table in a cozy portion of his sunlit kitchen. It didn't take much urging to get him to talk about the points of interest the house contained, and there were many. He also spoke about his background and his ambitions.

Traveling in and around the city of Saratoga Springs exposes one to exquisite examples of residential

architecture that spans more than two centuries. Some view the structures passively; John Witt, a city native, became impassioned by them. Later, as a member of the U.S. Ski Team, John traveled widely. He spent free time absorbing the contents of books dedicated to architecture and construction. Wherever he ventured he would study the local architecture, looking for the aspects that made it enduring and distinctive and locking the key features into his memory. So, it comes as no surprise that residential design became the focal point, figuratively and literally, of his endeavors. In fact he would become a leader in "design/build" before the term became fashionable.

In 1993 John was basically a one-man company, working from a home office. He would create a concept for a home, have it formally drawn up and hire and oversee subcontractors to construct his vision. He told me that he saw a fully staffed company in his future, but that it would come through slow, well-managed growth. And so it has. And so we discussed in a much more recent meeting in the company's administrative center that aptly occupies a restored residence representative of Saratoga history and style.

TODAY, WITT CONSTRUCTION, Inc. has completed about 200 homes, all custom-designed and singularly built, all in keeping with John's notion of how a house should be put together, how it should look, and how it should feel, especially within the Saratoga context. Today, and with each passing year, both the number of homes Witt Construction produces and the company's dollar volume tend to rise (well into an eight-figure total). To do this the company has had to increase staff and space for staff to function. Witt Construction now employs 32 or more specialists. John says, "new employees seek us out so we can 'cherry pick,' so to speak, and hire the best. Both in the field and in the office we have a good group of people always trying to get even



Up and coming builder John Witt at his Autumn Lane home in 1993.

better." Much is done in-house, including the company's signature in-house design that is now further enhanced by an in-house decorating team. Nevertheless, John says "I get my hands on everything going out the door."

"We read the nice article in the Gazette today and it reminded us of the wonderful experience we had planning and building our house with you 12 years ago, including the 'napkin drawings.' ... [Our friends] are amazed how satisfied we were and still are." — M.S. & S. S.

It is fair to infer that the public perception of Witt Construction is that it is a company primarily oriented to the design, both interior and exterior, and construction of upper-end or luxury homes. The physical manifestations dot the city and its immediate environs. Some are integrated into long-established neighborhoods or sit alone along a rural road. Others form a kinship with other Witt homes in a cul-de-sac or a more expansive grouping.

The public perception stems, in part, from the extraordinary Witt homes thousands of visitors see during the annual Saratoga Showcase of Homes, an event John Witt was instrumental in



**AMONG WITT CONSTRUCTION'S
NUMEROUS AWARDS ...**

2004

Best in American Living Award
(National Association of Home Builders)

2002

Best in American Living Award
(National Association of Home Builders)

2002

Pacesetter Award for Design
(*Custom Home* magazine)

1995-2001

Best Overall Home Awards
(Saratoga Showcase of Homes)

1998

Best in American Living Award
(National Association of Home Builders)

1997

Custom Home of the Year
(*Custom Builder* magazine)



implementing when he was president of the Saratoga Builders Association. In fact, it is widely believed that John raised the standards for the Showcase by attending meticulously to every detail from initial drawings to the final presentation of his entry. "The Showcase gives us a chance to experiment with our design creativity, integrate new ideas and install products that our potential customers may not have seen before."

The image of Witt Construction also results from the many awards the company has received [see box for examples] for design. A further testament to the popular approval of Witt designs is that buyers purchase the company's home plans for construction outside the region. Indeed, one ardent admirer had John flying to Pennsylvania to design an estate home with a "green building" (environmentally responsible) orientation.

Building green, by the way, is not a stretch for Witt Construction. The Witt company and John personally have always been conscious of emerging technologies and products both old and new that provide greater energy efficiency, healthier interior air quality, durability and low maintenance, among other green elements. Thus, using passive solar design, natural (wood, tile) and superior energy conservation products (insulation, sealant, windows), air/heat exchangers, HEPA air filtration, radiant heat and superior energy conservation are common items in Witt-constructed homes. Furthermore, John is a strong advocate for building while "avoiding a change in the character of natural terrain."

ON THE COVER: A classic Saratoga-style front porch graces this home, exemplifying Witt Construction's passion for detail. Interiors from the home are shown opposite this page. Photos © Randall Perry Photography.



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Witt Construction's Park Alley, a grouping of 11 homes, pays respect to the design integrity of Saratoga's North Broadway grand homes/carriage house setting.

"We would like you to know that we absolutely LOVE our home and that everyone at Witt Construction did an outstanding job and was wonderful to work with." — L.G. & E.G.

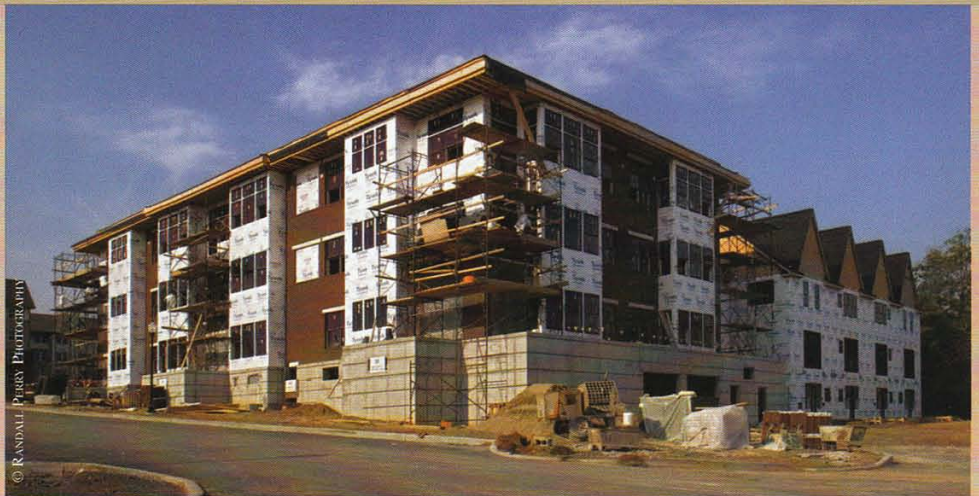
THE CREATIVE DESIGN, scale, amenities and overall quality are not the only appeals of Witt Construction homes. Witt looks for locations that add value and desirability. Saratoga Farms, for

instance, is Witt's homage to equestrian-oriented clients. Ample lots drawn out of rolling meadows provide for paddocks and grazing areas. The first home in the site, "Equestrian Estate," won Witt Construction, Inc. its third "Best in American Living Award," the foremost residential design competition honor in the United States.

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. . . the luxury home image, often on a large lot, doesn't fully represent the company. A primary example is Excelsior Park, Witt Construction's biggest and most challenging project to date. . . .

John collaborated with national award winning architect Mithun of Seattle, Washington, and Saratoga-Albany region professionals LA Group, Creekside Graphics and Kurzon Architects to devise a design heretofore unseen in the Capital Region.



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fully represent the company. A primary example is Excelsior Park, Witt Construction's biggest and most challenging project to date. The project near Northway Exit 15 has garnered considerable media attention. Justifiably so. It is nothing if not unique.

Typically, a prime location adjacent to an interstate exit would become commercially developed. Traveling widely in search of creative inspiration is routine for John. In preparation for Excelsior Park his search was particularly purposeful. He was looking for ideas for a mixed-use concept. Once he settled on an overall layout for the location, John collaborated with national award winning architect Mithun of Seattle, Washington, and Saratoga-Albany region professionals LA Group, Creekside Graphics and Kurzon Architects to devise a design heretofore unseen in the Capital Region. Their work includes the first building; the next building will be designed by Architecture Plus of Troy, NY.

The result will be a 55-acre enclave containing many of the elements of an intact village, plus special amenities like courtyards and a spa. Moreover, the services that won't be within the site are already a short drive or leisurely walk away. And the option to walk within the "Park" or to outside destinations isn't an exaggeration. Excelsior Park will have considerable forever-open space and walking trails, one complete with a stone bridge connection to woodlands. Even a walk to downtown Saratoga Springs will not be taxing. Eventually several hundred people will live or work in the Park. Some may well do both. They will have a choice of between 200 and 230 living units (primarily condominiums) in which to live, and the potential to work within 75,000 to 80,000 square feet of office space or 10,000 square feet of retail shop space. All these structures will be added to a site that already holds a new, brand name hotel. John feels that residents will experience a true "sense of place."



The Witt Construction design/build team.

A LESS AUSPICIOUS but equally fitting example of the Witt diversity is Southside, appropriately named as it is on the southside of Saratoga Springs within walking distance of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. Southside is Witt Construction's response to the need to maximize the use of space: to make homes of 1,800-plus square feet feel more like 3,000 square feet. The project follows on the heels of the company's urban and somewhat similar concept project, Park Alley, where the designs have already demonstrated that homes of 2,000 to 3,000 square feet can feel "really big" inside.

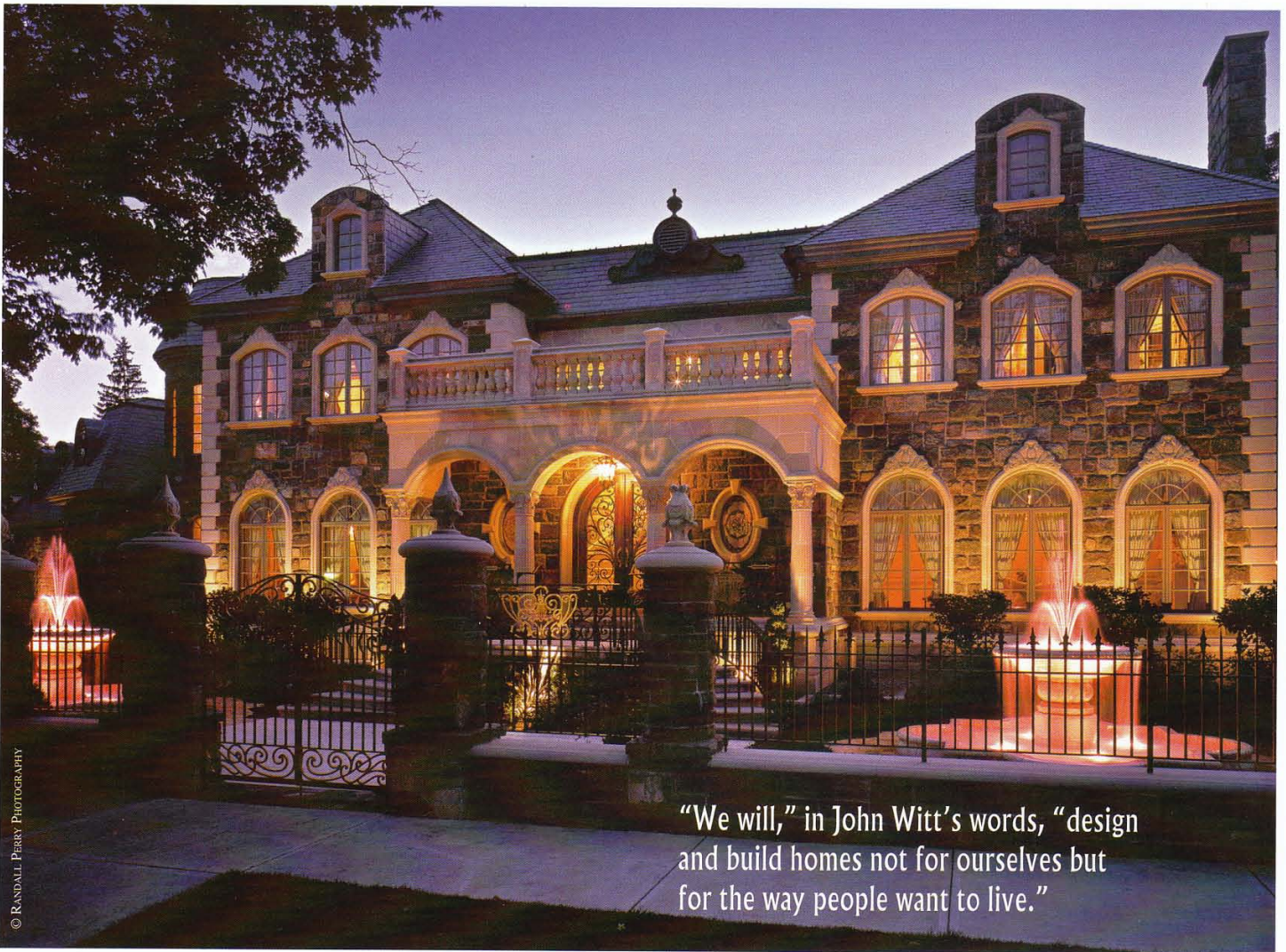
Southside is a 16-lot subdivision devoted to "entry level" custom

homes situated on small city lots. When completed the feel should be that of new homes in a small town neighborhood rather than that of a suburban development. John says "Our target market for Southside is young families and empty nesters. ... Homes like these are hard to find for young families [in Saratoga Springs]."

The homes will be built from a portfolio of Witt-generated designs and have similarities, but they also will have many of the amenities and details of more expensive homes. Some may have, for example, John's idea for a 21st century addition to the traditional room identities: a family/home "control center." John says these rooms can be small but

Witt Construction, Inc, At-A-Glance

Principal/Founder:	John Witt (1987)
Services:	Custom Home Design and Construction
Service Area:	Capital, Saratoga Springs, Lake George Region
Notable Sites:	Excelsior Park, Southside, Saratoga Farm, Park Alley, Lakeside at Reily's, Autumn Lane
Affiliations:	Saratoga Builders Association, Builders Association of Northern New York, New York State Builders Association, National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), NAHB Builders 20 Club, Saratoga Preservation Foundation, Saratoga Chamber of Commerce
Office:	563 N. Broadway, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
Phone:	(518) 587-4113
Web Site:	www.wittconstruction.com



“We will,” in John Witt’s words, “design and build homes not for ourselves but for the way people want to live.”

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effective, combining the notion of a home office with the controls that regulate a home’s technology.

“[We] again thank you for an outstanding job on the completion of our home at Park Alley North, ... a wonderful place for us to live. We moved in the Tuesday before Thanksgiving with a punch list of six or seven items. By Wednesday morning at 8:30 the contractors had responded to all the issues. ... We appreciate the fine professional staff you have assembled to assist in creating quality homes reflecting the heritage and history of Saratoga Springs.” — J. M.

IN ADDITION TO these projects the company has pending activities “in all directions” beyond Saratoga Springs. John says “We still will look for the single in-fill sites in the

city but for us to do 20 or more homes a year we have to extend farther out. There is not enough land available in the city and land costs have risen dramatically. But we have some exciting plans for beyond the city. For example, we expect to build several higher-end homes on Woodward Road in Wilton. It is an outstanding eco-friendly property with a view of the Vermont mountains.”

From a personal perspective, I found it fascinating to see that John’s vision of slow, steady growth had come true, and that it is likely to continue unabated. There will be challenges — finding suitable land — and changes — product, for one will change with the market and with technology. But Witt Construction, Inc. seems well founded. John says both the processes and know-how are in place to react and adapt. The company will continue to strive to

provide value in its homes and homesites. “We will,” in John Witt’s words, “design and build homes not for ourselves but for the way people want to live.” ♦

SPEC SHEET

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- Capitol District Supply:** Kohler products
- Crawford Door and Window Sales:** Pella windows & doors
- Curtis Lumber:** Merillat cabinetry, lumber
- John D. Marcella Appliances:** kitchen appliances
- Overhead Door of Glens Falls:** carriage-house garage doors
- Precision Glass and Aluminum:** shower doors, mirrors, closets
- Stock Building Supply:** lumber