

Sunspace Business: Changing with the Times



Bob Chew (left) and Ray Silva (right) used to install sunrooms exclusively, but they have diversified into kitchen remodels and room additions.

Prefabricated sunrooms used to be about 80% of R.W. Chew's business in Barrington, R.I. But Robert Chew saw a change coming—a lowered demand for solar-style sunspaces. Unless he changed the nature of his services, Chew's business wasn't going to survive, let alone thrive.

He decided to diversify. Today, Chew and his partners, Ray Silva and Katie Remington, install few sunroom kits, but now they remodel kitchens and site-build room additions. They also sell design services. They still erect or build about 24 sunrooms a year in homes in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Chew and Silva talk about the changing role—and the changing design—of the sunspace in the 1990s, and about the changes dealers must make to overcome lower demand.

JLC: How much of your business depended on selling and installing sunspaces?

Chew: We had been marketing ourselves strictly as sunroom dealers until about three years ago when we started to forecast that New England was going into a slump. We wanted to become known as a remodeling contractor and a kitchen dealership. We felt that those two specialties would be a lot less affected by a severe economic downturn.

JLC: Did your customers view sunspaces primarily as an energy source or a luxury item?

Chew: When I first got into sunrooms, there was a lot of concern about energy. More people felt a sunroom offered them some security if they couldn't get fuel deliveries, and some security as far as being able to grow food. But a lot of those values have been left behind. Now, unless people are in a very high income bracket, a sunroom is the kind of thing they'll put off when they're unsure about the economy.

JLC: How have design tastes changed?

Chew: When we first started doing sunrooms in the 1970s, they were energy-efficient structures that had sloped glazing that faced south, solid roofs, and

plenty of ventilation. Then during the middle 1980s, the home magazines started featuring all-glass, curved units. That created a very strong demand for that type.

Now I hear customers coming in and saying, "I want a sunroom, but I don't want an all-glass hot box." A lot of the companies that came in and made a fast buck were not selling the units with the right number of windows, fans, and shading systems. To do it right added an awful lot to the cost. A big reason we stopped doing as much business in prefabricated units is that it was hard to justify the retail cost to the consumer.

JLC: In surveys that gauge return value on home improvements, the all-glass types rarely return high dollar amounts. Appraisers say they don't look permanent. Is that what you're responding to?

Chew: I know a few years ago, they were saying that an all-glass room was returning better than 100% of the cost. Now, in this year's Remodeling magazine cost-versus-value guide, it's 52%. They're being looked at like a swimming pool: Some people want them and some may not. I don't think people are going to

pay a premium for a prefabricated sunroom.

JLC: What are you giving your customers today?

Chew: We're giving them a custom-designed, stick-built sunroom that has many operable windows, vented skylights in 90% of the cases, and high insulation in the non-glazed areas. I think the fad years are over. I still see a growing market for a sunroom that enhances existing architecture, that's easy to heat and keep cool, and provides a function in the house—whether as a room or a bump-out. In many cases, we're giving them a redesigned version of the Florida room, which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

JLC: What are the average size and glazing system of a sunroom today?

Chew: The average sunspace is a 12x16-foot first-floor addition. On the average it has one patio door. I would say our jobs break down about half sliding and half swinging patio doors. We've noticed that the new swinging patio doors do lock better. But there are good, insulated sliders.

We've been using low-e glass almost exclusively for the past couple of years. We've also used a fair amount of heat mirror and found it to be very satisfactory in the all-glass sunrooms. We mostly use windows clad with vinyl.

JLC: Is it easier to blend in with the existing architecture with a custom-built sunroom than with a kit?

Chew: It's easier to do with a custom design than with something out of a box that plugs onto the back of the house. In looking back, early sunrooms look like they were really just stuck on, rather than integrated into the architecture.

JLC: Is it difficult to customize a kit?

Silva: I'll give you an example. You buy from a manufacturer, you get one shot at cutting. You cut it wrong, and you can't go down to the lumber store and buy another 2x8. You can make changes to accommodate needs with a stick-built.

JLC: How does quality compare between kits and site built?

Chew: In all-glass sunrooms, there's a lot of variation among different manu-

The fad years are over, but the market's still strong for spaces that enhance a home's design, are easy to heat and cool, and add usable space.

facturers—in the glazing materials and the caulking, some of which have proven not to have a very long lifespan. In some cases, in five or six years, the homeowners are left with a fairly major reconstruction bill. Also there are quite a few manufacturers that are no longer in business. As a dealer, it's hard for us to get parts.

When you go to a stick-built sunroom, it's a different story. The materials going into that are equal to or better than the materials that went into the house, so it's not a product that will need major reconstruction in five, ten, or even 20 years.

JLC: With stick-built models, are you returning to standard carpentry skills?

Chew: Definitely. We use subs now. When we were erecting manufactured spaces, we almost had to use employees and train them for that particular product. There are quite a few manufacturers that are no longer in business.

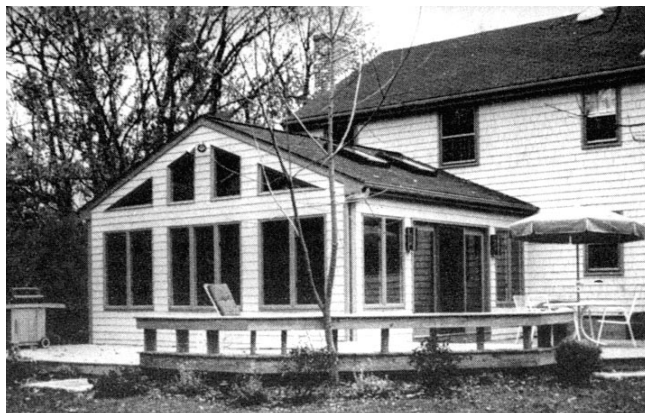
Silva: Some of the prefabricated units were nightmares to put together. The only one we use now—The Sunroom Co. out of Leola, Pa.—is the easiest to put together. Seventy-five percent of it comes preassembled.

JLC: Do you increase the thermal mass to avoid overheating?

Chew: If we're putting a sunspace on an energy-efficient house, especially one that already has some solar glass and some solar gain, then we would use some thermal mass to store that heat for release after the sun goes down.

However, I'd say the average house that gets a sunroom today is 25 years old. It's not especially well insulated. So normally, what we now do is just open up the wall entirely between the house and the new structure. We're using a lot of ceiling fans, but I think the venting skylights, properly placed, take care of most of the problem.

Silva: If it's too hot, you reverse the fan



Modern site-built "Florida rooms" have largely replaced kit sunspaces in Chew's business. They have lots of glass in the walls and ceilings, adequate insulation in non-glass areas, and ceiling fans to help with comfort control.

and shoot the heat up to the skylight. And vice-versa, you can also use the fan to bring the heat down into the room.

JLC: *On floors, is ceramic tile still the rule?*

Chew: Seventy-five percent still use tile, but they choose it for its easy maintenance, not its heat-storage properties.

We're typically building over a crawlspace. We use 1/2-inch CDX plywood, and 3/8-inch patch and touch-sanded underlayment, run in perpendicular directions. I don't think we've ever had a callback for tile. It gives the plywood some expansion room. We don't glue the subfloor unless we're using carpeting; then we glue and screw 3/4-inch plywood and put the carpeting over it. We put a 6-mil polyethylene ground cover under a thin concrete cap.

Silva: We ventilate crawlspaces with block vents or standard foundation windows. If we need access for inspecting a heating or electrical system at a later date, we mount the foundation windows backwards.



A stick-built sunroom off a kitchen serves as a breakfast nook. The sunroom, part of a total kitchen remodel, adds year-round eating space and lots of light—both lacking in the original kitchen.

JLC: *Is light-commercial a growth area for sunrooms?*

Chew: Four years ago it was extremely high growth. Right now, it's going the other direction. Most restaurants that would have them have already put them on.

JLC: *If you were going to rank the uses of sunspaces or the new Florida room, what are the primary uses?*

Chew: Family rooms. We also do a lot of kitchens. We also use some of what we learned about adding light when we remodel bedrooms and baths.

JLC: *How do people respond to the life-in-a-fishbowl feeling that comes with all-glass sunrooms?*

Chew: Most people want some kind of window treatment that allows them to control the amount of light and that gives them privacy at night. I have a large wrap-around sunroom on my house. At night, I don't want to have everyone driving up the street see what I'm doing.

JLC: *How do you apply sunspaces to kitchens?*

Chew: A lot of the kitchen work we do involves making a bump-out off of kitchens that aren't big enough or bright enough. The house probably has a formal dining room, but everyday meals are really done in a less formal environment, and these sunroom kitchens really address that, the way a breakfast nook does.

JLC: *Do people still grow plants in their sunspaces?*

Chew: If people want, we put a little greenhouse window in their sunroom addition, so people can maintain their

houseplants, a pepper plant, herbs, or whatever.

JLC: *How do you handle design tasks for custom work?*

Chew: With kits, it's easier to open a catalogue. But with custom, we rely on computer-aided design. We use Data-Cad to do custom designs, integrate kit designs—everything.

We feel that our CAD design capabilities distance us from the guy working out of a pickup truck. We put a lot of energy into developing and marketing our design abilities.

Silva: The computer eliminates surprise. It says this is what it's going to look like, and it does.

JLC: *Do you market design services to consumers only or to other builders as well?*

Chew: We charge consumers up front for our design work—up to \$2,000. But the drawings usually don't go out of house. We also do drawings for other contractors, but they release us from liability. Doing drawings for other contrac-

tors establishes a relationship. We'll have a shot later at getting their kitchen work.

We have a very close working relationship with a structural engineer. He'll spec beams, review all our rafter sizes. If we're going to put a footing in and have soil questions, he'll come out and inspect the site. He'll review our plans and put his stamp on them.

JLC: *A lot of sunroom dealers have gone out of business. Was it their own fault?*

Chew: A lot went out of business because of faults of the manufacturers. If a manufacturer went out of business, and you had pieces missing, it just stopped you dead. We've been dealers for 14 different brands of sunspaces. At least five are out of business. That's been hard for us as a company.

JLC: *What advice would you offer someone who's dealing in sunrooms as a primary source of income?*

Silva: Start developing a related product—hot tubs, lawn furniture, window treatments.

Chew: Go back to your strengths. If your strengths are retail and you have a strong sales network, find something else that requires a strong sales network. Our background was heavily labor- and construction-oriented, not retail oriented. It was easier for us to diversify by getting back into putting dormers on second floors and doing room additions, bump-outs, and kitchens.

And consider joining forces with someone else. A lot of us are going to have to do that to stay competitive, to be able to stay on top of everything that's changing in this business. ■