

It's a decorating nirvana

By Aisha Sultan

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June Roesslein, one of the matriarchs of the local interior design industry, paused in front of a martini-shaped bar sink.

She was wondering about the functionality before she realized that the sink's whimsical shape was the point.

The Mystic Martini stainless steel sink by Elkay retails for about \$1,000, and at Beck/Allen Cabinetry it will be paired with a gooseneck faucet made to resemble a stirrer.

Welcome to the Interior Design Center of St. Louis. It's where eye-candy, luxury house furnishings meet their deep-pocketed buyers. And while it may seem counterintuitive to launch a major house furnishings design center at a time when new-house sales have crashed, the furniture industry has been bleeding and the consumer confidence is shaky, founder Kevin Kenney says the time has come for St. Louis to claim its place in the market.

For years, local interior designers have flocked to the Merchandise Mart in Chicago

and similar centers in Los Angeles, Dallas and Atlanta to search for their most discerning clients' houses.

"For individual designers, this is a godsend," Roesslein said, after Kenney walked her through the property earlier this month during a grand opening party for more than 1,000 house builders, architects and designers.

"Clients get frustrated running all over town" during a major renovation or when building a new house, added Barbara

Slavkin, president of June Roesslein Interiors.

Nearly two years ago, Kenney purchased the two buildings in the former Sunshine Drapery Plaza on Page Service Road in Maryland Heights. A year ago, he moved his 50,000-square-foot furniture showroom, KDR Showrooms, to anchor his vision for a one-stop shopping center for luxury house owners.

He later lured top-of-the-line stores such as appliance retailer Autco Home, Beck/Allen Cabinetry, Accessories by Appointment, a Premier plumbing gallery and a floor-covering showroom to the center. He's negotiating with two lighting companies and has an eye out for a high-end tile and stone retailer.

"I think this is probably the ideal time to do it, because the housing market has bottomed out," he said.

He believes the center will capitalize on pent-up demand. "When you're going to expand, you want to do it when the market is down."

And most of the news coming from the housing and furniture industries certainly has been down.

Richmond, Va.-based furnishings analyst Jerry Epperson says the industry has been suffering for the last 22 months. In the last five years, the furniture business has lost 4,500 stores and opened just 750.

"That's a pretty bad ratio," he said.

Ken Smith, managing partner at accounting and consulting firm Smith Leonard, of High Point, N.C., noted in his latest industry report that orders in March were down 11 percent from a year ago.

But the luxury end of the mar-

ket has not been hit as hard because those purchases are not as sensitive to a tightening credit market, Epperson said.

Those catering locally to the high-end market of million-dollar houses say their businesses are either holding steady or even doing better.

"The upscale consumer has elected to stay put and put money into their homes," Kenney said. He says his furniture business, which sells to designers and has recently added higher-end lines, is up 80 percent from last year.

Well aware of the troubled mid-market in both furniture and housing, he said: "Thank God we're at this end."

St. Louis-based interior designer Alan Brainerd acknowledges that even his wealthiest clients have been affected by the economic downturn.

"They economize, but in much grander ways than the average American does," he said. Instead of buying a new \$1.5 million house, clients may opt for a \$500,000 renovation.

Ellen Kurtz, who owns Accessories by Appointment in the Interior Design Center, says the majority of her business has shifted from new-house buyers to remodelers. Clients typically are prepared to spend \$25,000 to furnish a single room — not including the budget for rugs, lamps and artwork. Furnishing an entire new house can easily run into six figures, designers say.

Brainerd remembers when the industry tried to establish a Merchandise Mart downtown in the mid-1980s. The location was unable to entice mid- and west St. Louis County designers, he said.

Most of the Interior Design

Center stores will be open to the public. To increase foot traffic through the KDR furniture showroom, there will be a "designer on call" at the American Society of Interior Designers office in the complex who can take walk-up clients through the trade-only showroom and make purchases for them.

The grand opening created excitement here among builders and designers eyeing finds such as the German-engineered cabinets by Poggenpohl, which open with a tap of the fingers and have not been displayed in St. Louis for more than 30 years. Glenn Arnold, owner of DeShetler Homes, which builds custom houses ranging from \$1.5 million to \$6.7 million, described the Autco showroom as featuring "super appliances on steroids."

Kenney's plans for the center are far from complete. He said he plans to add a bistro-type restaurant within the year and start developing two additional acres in the next two years. Excluding the Chicago area, he expects the center to draw buyers from a 300-mile radius.

"The ultimate vision is that this will be a full destination for total home and office interiors," he said.

And as far as the slumping economy and troubled housing and furniture industries, Jay McIntosh, news editor for Furniture Today, said Kenney's gamble may pay off: "If he's got enough money and chutzpah, maybe he can stick it out."

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