

# Builder/Architect

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Panama Properties, Inc.**  
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## *"I Really Love This Job!"*

*By Ann L. Marsden*

"I really love this job," laughs Tom Eldridge, master custom builder and president of Panama Properties, Inc. Tom has been a builder for over 30 years and founded Panama Properties, Inc. in 1983, but he still maintains the boyish enthusiasm and excitement for every project that he had at the beginning of his career.

Resembling in amazing detail his company's logo, the Panama-hatted, bearded and twinkling-eyed Tom Eldridge is above all a "people person," who believes that the relationship between builder and buyer is one of the most important factors in creating customer satisfaction. He is at his happiest (and his best) when

dealing with customers who know what they want and are willing to become partners in the building process with Tom. "Building a new home is not only an emotional process, it is a learning experience for both me and my client. The more personal interaction we have, the happier I am," Tom contends. "That gives me the tools that I need to give them what they expect."

Over 80 percent of Panama Properties homes are contract rather than spec. "We are pleased that most of our business is by referral," says Tom. "That means that I can get to know our customers and their preferences and work together with them as a team to build their ideal

home. Our goal is to provide our customers with more value than they anticipate. We feel that we are among the most competitive builders within our price point. We want our home buyers to be overwhelmed with what we have done for them. If our homeowner feels that way, it is all worth the effort.

"The team concept is really what we are all about," declares Tom. "As a team, Panama Properties has real substance. We can offer our customer a complete package of quality, value and aesthetics, from the services of great architects and landscape designers to a dedicated office staff professional superintendents and great subcontractors and

This stunning kitchen/living area is the perfect place for family gatherings or informal entertaining. Photography by Bryan L. Willy, Willy Photography.





Tom Eldridge's attention to fine detailing is evidenced not only in the front of the home, but in the back elevation as well. Here, a screened-in porch and second floor balcony overlook an inviting free-form pool and hot tub. Photography by Bryan L. Willy, Willy Photography.

suppliers. Several hours of free consultation with award-winning professional designers are also part of the package. In the office, Brenda Bevard, our office manager, is the nucleus of this whole company. She keeps us together, coordinating interaction between us all."

Highly efficient computerized programming keeps the Panama Properties team on top of every job. "We carry laptop computers with us, so no matter where we go, we are always aware of every aspect of every project," Tom notes. "That gives us

complete control of both our scheduling and our quality and it also keeps us flexible to make the changes that will occur in this price range."

*"Tom Eldridge is credible, honest and makes delivering a quality product his number one goal. Tom is definitely a 'can-do' kind of person. He really listened to what we were looking for in a home, and made several suggestions that we incorporated into the plan. In short, Tom built my dream house...I can't say enough good*

*things about him."*

**—Val and Regis Napolitano**

Panama Properties' custom homes range in price from \$750,000 to \$1.3 million. Most are Traditional. "We do a lot of European Traditional and Country French. That is a more asymmetrical, cozier feel than the vertical and rectangular style of a formal Traditional home," Tom explains. "We build primarily in East Cobb County which is an extremely popular and growing area. The public schools in Cobb County are exceptional." Twelve homes are projected for Panama Properties this year.

Homes built by Panama Properties are to be found in the most popular and exclusive master-planned communities in the Atlanta area, including: River Park, River Cliff, Tiller Walk in Buckhead, Atlanta Country Club, Marietta Country Club and Roswell. The company's current East Cobb communities include River Park and River Cliff, both bordering the Chattahoochee National Park with easy access to the Chattahoochee National Recreation Area and its beautiful green preserves. The area is unique in that it is one of the last major East Cobb areas with wilderness tract. Tom enjoys building within award-winning builder groups in carefully chosen communities where there is great architectural control. "The better the builders are around me, the more comfortable I feel," Tom explains. "Good developers recognize quality work and that makes their communities a more desirable place to live. And all of us in quality builder groups are focused on building the very best homes we can for our customers."

*"Tom Eldridge is a terrific builder. Conscientious, personable and easy to work with, he took a lot of the usual stress out of the building process for us. Additionally, you can always count on him to stand by his product after the sale is complete. We've been pleased to recommend him to several of our friends."*

**—Maimie and Dale Rayburn**

Although the typical Panama Properties home is traditional, Tom enjoys the challenge of an unusual project. Just recently he completed a Frank Lloyd Wright-style home which was featured on the "Atlanta's Best New Homes" program. "This was such a unique project," he says. "The key points of the Frank Lloyd Wright architecture we wanted to stress were the Prairie-style low, flat roofline and the

use of sandstone, concrete and industrial architectural details in both the interior and exterior. We had to create the look of sandstone as it was difficult to find the natural product. We ended up using limestone, broken and stratified, to create a sandstone appearance. Another dramatic feature of the home was the family room window, which was 20 feet wide and eight feet high. It was a great challenge, but we all—

home buyer, builder, architect, subcontractors and suppliers—worked together as a team to get the job done. One of the reasons that I loved this job was the happiness and excitement of the homeowners when they took possession of the key to their new home."

John Self was the architect who designed the project. "We have developed great relationships with several of Atlanta's most popular and talented architects," Tom comments. "Besides John, who has been working with us for over eight years, we work with Bill Harrison, Colin Lichtenstein, and the very prominent Chattanooga-based Jack Herr."

"His unique sense of humor and personality help put a client at ease in what can be a potentially overwhelming process," Jack Herr has said of Tom. "He has great success in establishing a positive relationship based on trust and respect. Tom is able to deliver on his promise to create a quality home that is as uniquely individual as are the clients for whom he builds."

*"We didn't realize how lucky we were to find a builder like Tom Eldridge until after we really got to know him. Tom was able to take our rough ideas and really expand and improve upon them, creating a home that we really love. He really seemed to take a personal interest in making sure that all of our needs and expectations were met. We feel fortunate to have had Tom as our builder."*

—Cozette and Mike Tanner

Even though Tom enjoys the test of a unique project one thing does remain a common denominator in his work—outstanding quality in craftsmanship and materials. One of the trademarks of a Panama Properties home is the extensive use of stucco, especially in combination with stacked stone. "Stucco is a beautiful, durable and low-maintenance material, but it has been given a bad reputation because of improper installation," Tom asserts. "We have never had a problem, because our subcontractor, A&A

Built in custom cabinetry, wine rack and bar sink are all easily accessible to both the kitchen work area and the great room beyond. Photography by Bryan L. Willy, Willy Photography.



Stucco Construction, employs Old World Romanian stucco craftsmen who implement a hard coat concrete stucco system involving a three-step application—base coat, scratch coat and finish coat. It is applied directly over a semi-hard, black felt paper-covered surface reinforced with extruded galvanized lathe. Our trims are also solid concrete—no Styrofoam is ever used. The trims are hand extruded using individually created sheet metal forms.”

Tom is also on the lookout for new products to increase the quality and value of his homes. “I try to stay focused on what is current in trends and materials,” he remarks. “There are some exciting new products out there. One is a solid PVC material by Marley that we are using in windows, shutters and trims. You can heat and bend it to go around curves. It can be nailed, sawed, painted, molded and shaped, but it never rots. Homeowners often prefer wood, but we try to convince them of the advantages of using proven new materials.”

An exciting new material for Panama Properties is Advantech, an innovative floor decking. “It is a manufactured wood product, tongue-in-groove, and 3/4-inch thick. It is much better than plywood but is just about identically priced. It is treated with various resins so that it will not expand or contract. We also use manufactured wood products such as Microlam beams, as do all good builders now, as well as OSB, or oriented strand board, on our exteriors,” Tom continues.

Other Panama Properties touches are steel reinforced, 3,000-psi, poured concrete foundations, above-code energy packages, deep multi-piece crown molding, eight-inch-plus cap baseboards and top name manufacturers such as Trane and Lennox. All specifications are thoroughly covered in an extensive and detailed document so there are never any unforeseen “surprises.” “The specification sheet is our Bible,” jokes Tom. “It covers everything in the house, room by room. If there are changes, they are confirmed by signed change orders.”



Another focus for Panama Properties is updating the wiring to prepare homes for the future. “We are now using category 5 wiring and have added an upgraded TV cable that prevents a loss of signal throughout the home,” Tom says. “What we are really doing is putting in a better wiring foundation so that homeowners will have the option of adding upgrades later without additional work and expense. At our price level people expect to be able to have home theater, improved security systems, home offices and Smart Home options. These will be available to our customers. We also offer the option of stereo systems with both indoor and outdoor speakers. We just signed a contract with Digital Interiors who has the Smart Home franchise and they will be doing all our low voltage work including telephone, TV and home theater,” he notes.

New trends in home design are

another thing that Tom pays close attention to, such as the demand for gourmet kitchens. “Range hoods are coming back in, and we have to pay special attention to kitchen design because the popular vaulted ceilings force us to place range hoods on the wall,” Tom says. “People also are demanding 30-inch ovens rather than the typical 28-inch oven and they want that commercial cooktop look of stainless steel with burner knobs under the overhang.”

Prospective home buyers can be assured that Panama Properties, Inc. is a truly professional organization. It is an active member of the HBA and a voluntary participant in the Certified Professional Home Builder program, a program which was established to recognize professionals in the industry who are willing to meet and maintain the program’s high criteria professionalism, customer service and customer satisfaction.

*"Tom has a great sense of humor, and working with him on building a home was not only an educational experience, but a lot of fun as well. We really love our open, airy floor plan and all of the little extra details that make our home stand out. Tom was dependable, and always delivered on his promises. That means a lot when you're investing in a home for your family. I'd feel pleased to recommend him to anyone looking to build a home."*

—Charles Chitwood

"After-market service is just as important as the sale of the home," Tom insists. Not only does Panama Properties offer the standard one-year builder warranty, it conducts three customer-attended walk-throughs. The pre-closing walk-through usually takes place three or four days before closing following a detailed form. "Ninety percent of that list will be finished before closing," Tom says. "The rest will be done within 10 days of the walk-through."

A 30-day walk-through is done following the same procedures and that list will be completed within 10 days. "The last walk-through is done 11 months after closing and that list also has a very short closure period," Tom says. "We would like to guarantee that every home is perfect and will never need fixing, but that just isn't humanly possible. What we can guarantee is that we will always give personal attention to our homeowners to satisfy their needs."

How can home buyers feel confident in their choice of a builder? "By doing their homework," Tom feels. "Check out the builder. Visit his homes. Talk with the homeowner about quality, value and service. I take prospective customers to a house we have completed and step aside so they can talk freely with the homeowner. I believe they will find out we have the integrity, talent, ability and desire to give them what they want."

"Do I think I build a better home than my competition? Do I believe I build it bigger and faster? Sure I do!

I'm sure that my competitors feel they do also. The secret is that you really have to believe it. We do have the best team of professionals in the business and we are very proud of the strong relationships we have built with our customers and within the industry. That will create a lot of friends for us, but it won't build a great house. I believe where our team excels is in our willingness to

persevere, to never stop until everyone is satisfied. And I hope that everyone enjoys the process as much as I do. *This is fun. I really love this job!"*

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B/A

This spectacular great room, with its double-height ceiling and towering arched windows, is the perfect place not only for holiday or large-scale entertaining, but for curling up with a good book as well. Photography by Bryan L. Willy, Willy Photography.

