

For Steve and Betty Nickel, the task of designing a house and the task of building it have always been inseparable. Their affinity for the design/build approach goes back to their first project, a spec renovation they did in the mid 1980s, with Steve holding down a day job as a management consultant. A pair of subsequent spec houses drew enough positive attention that the

Steve and Betty Nickel

Nickels could begin working with clients' money rather than their own, and they launched themselves full-time into the custom home business. Sixteen years later, the couple still design every project they build. More importantly, they have leveraged their talents in a way that suits both their clients and their business to a T. ■ Betty, who pursued archi-



ecture as a second career after teaching and raising children, takes the lead in plan development and has final say on livability issues. "I have an architectural background as well as a physics background, so I do all of the structural work," says Steve, who also works out most elevations

and details. Betty designs all the kitchens and baths. "We don't bill by the hour," Steve says. "It's a fixed fee. If it takes 50 hours or 100 hours it's the same thing." Unlike builders who offer such services as a loss leader, though, the Nickels have made design a profit center. "We try to understand what our competition is getting and charge accordingly," Steve says. And unlike architects, the Nickels can concentrate on a small number of projects—three to five per year—within a small geographical area. Maintaining that focus over

a period of years has given the Nickels a unique depth of expertise in designing for the local climate, topography, and architectural context. Running a lean operation minimizes the company's overhead and lets the principals do the work they do best. ■ With their top-notch production crew, led by construction vice president Garry Kaepplinger, the Nickels are confident enough to let clients bid their plans with other builders if they like. And while some have taken them up on the offer, virtually all have built their homes with the Nickels. "They understand how invested we are in the project and how well we understand the house," says Betty.—*B.D.S.*

Betty and Steve Nickel bring an unusually broad range of skills to custom home design. And when the plans are done, Steve says, "there isn't anyone in the universe more qualified to build that house than we are."

The Portfolio Group
Estes Park, Colo.
Type of business: design/build
custom builder
Years in business: 16
Employees: 6
2003 volume: \$1.3 million
2003 starts: 3