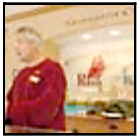


The name game

Call it Rainsong, Riva, Remembrance or Roxbury -- builders embrace branding

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When builder Pulte Homes tore down an old corn syrup plant in Emeryville two years ago to make way for new town homes, office wags began referring to the project as "Liquid Sugar."

Later, when it came time to finalize the complex's moniker, some thought the nickname should be scrapped.

"People said, 'It sounds drug related, like crystal meth or something,' " said Merry Sedlak, director of marketing at Pulte Homes Northern California division in Pleasanton. "But I said, I'm not changing it."

"This isn't another Heritage Park," she added. "So many times you see builders use the same name because they're tried and true. Liquid Sugar isn't tried and true."

Seeking to brand their products the way toothpaste makers and cola companies have for years, an increasing number of home builders are selecting unusual -- some might say too unusual -- names for their subdivisions. In particularly fast-growing parts of the Bay Area, developers are also under pressure to differentiate their work from the dozens of other projects springing up nearby.

A cursory look at any list of new home flyer tells the tale. There's Remembrance, an enclave of 20 or so homes several blocks away from downtown Sonoma. Across the bay in Dublin, builder Greenbriar Homes named its three developments Rainsong, Riva and Roxbury. In Stockton, there is Rhapsody, by California Homes.

The quirky names don't end with subdivisions. Among the model home names listed for Northern California on Newhomes.com are Ultima, Talisman, Volterra, Lusitana, Verdala and the Reagan I.

To be sure, builders have adorned their subdivisions -- not to mention model homes and streets -- with off-the-beaten-track names for decades. And many have lived beyond the initial marketing push. Though now 25 years old, Danville's Blackhawk gated community is still synonymous with luxury and prestige. At Livorna Estates in south Walnut Creek, all of the street names are horse-related (Dapplegrey Lane and Hackamore Lane, to name a few), undoubtedly a tribute to the equestrian

zoning from years past neighbors say, when homeowners had lots large enough to keep horses.

However, as oak, bay, pheasant and other geographic or horticultural names become increasingly prosaic, more builders are looking to abstract, names. In many cases, the name is designed to be attention-grabbing and evocative of a certain kind of lifestyle -- real or imagined.

Builders are "trying to create an image... trying to elevate (the development), said Burt Alper, strategy director at Catchword, an Oakland branding firm that has named such consumer items as Dreamery Ice Cream, Dockers' Stain Defender brand pants and the now-defunct pet food supplier Petopia.com.

"If it's in a relatively question-able neighborhood, they want it to be safe and luxurious," Alper added. "If it's rural, they want it to appear spacious and rustic."

Generally, builders have free rein when naming their subdivisions and model homes. While some firms brainstorm their own subdivision names, others hire outside marketers.

Naming streets, however, typically is a collaboration between the builder and the city. In some cases, the city provides a wish list of names -- prominent local figures, historic landmarks, etc. -- to be included, regardless of the name of the subdivision. Mostly, though, city officials check through submitted street names to weed out duplications and to ensure easy pronunciations and spellings.

Whether a subdivision name lives beyond the original sales blitz depends largely on whether the builder erects a permanent sign, sometimes called monumentation in building parlance. Some cities require a lasting stone or wood sign, others do not.

The name for Dublin's Rainsong, a 72-home development just off Interstate 580, was designed to evoke a "quiet, gentle, sylvan" setting, said Warren Hanson, the subdivision's sales manager.

"You want to create a different image than a crowded place with a lot of traffic and people," Hanson said, noting that a large number of buyers in Greenbriar's three subdivisions have moved from the South Bay.

A short time ago, sales agents referred to model homes as Plan 1 or Residence 4, Hanson added. "Now, it's the Almalfi or the Napoli."

(Hanson joked that buyers who pronounced the Chopin model correctly -- and not as "choppin' " received \$1 off the purchase price. Rainsong's other model names are Strauss, Vivaldi and Bach.)

Despite its allusion to forests and rumbling storms, however, Rainsong is largely devoid of mature trees and increasingly surrounded by large strip malls and other residential developments. And while Dublin receives only about 17 inches of rain a year -- below the statewide 21-inch average -- water does run through it. Tassajara Creek cuts through the Greenbriar developments, and Hanson notes that several bridges will eventually cross it when Roxbury is complete.

Other builders appear to be tapping into the post-Sept. 11 surge in patriotism. Ryland Homes recently built Americana in Tracy, where the model homes -- which run from 1,600 square feet to 2,500 square feet -- are called Independence, Heritage, Freedom and Liberty.

Young California Homes recently built a subdivision in American Canyon called America. The name drew from the town's name. In addition, company leaders used to name their communities with words that begin with "A", so that buyers would see their homes first in alphabetical listings.

At Stockton's Rhapsody, model homes are drawn from types of music -- Salsa, Calypso and Big Band.

Branding expert Alper said builders should be lauded for using some of the marketing practices perfected in the consumer products field. However, he and others note that some names impart the wrong feeling. For instance, Alper said, Remembrance, the Sonoma subdivision built by the O'Brien Group, is grave and vague at the same time -- not the ideal image for a new home project.

"Remembrance ... is that where homeowners go to die?" he joked.

"Names can overstep their bounds and become disingenuous and unbelievable," Alper said. "We often talk about Honest Abe's Used Cars. What's the first thing you think about when someone is screaming honesty? Why do they have to say it?"

David Gauger, a principal at Gauger and Santy, a San Francisco branding and advertising firm, said builders should also avoid names that are too whimsical or fantastic.

"I remember when I was a kid growing up in San Jose, there was a story book village, where all the street names and homes were based on fairy tales," he said. "You wonder... that seems like it's forcing a theme down many generations to come."

Another category that may have overstayed its welcome is the popular Italian nomenclature. Although the Bay Area and Italy share a similar climate, Italian names are on the verge of overtaking Spanish names in the too-common department, according to Gauger.

"The Italian village image is maybe a bit short lived with the way styles change," he said. John Duran, a sales manager at a development called Siena at Tuscany, located in the rolling hills of northern Santa Rosa, disagrees. Even buyers who have visited Siena, Italy, are impressed with the development, he added.

"We might not have the old buildings, but I'll bet this Siena is prettier than that Siena," Duran said.

Some builders admit to having overreached on subdivision names and are now digging deeper into historical archives to find fresh names.

"We've picked some good themes and some bad themes," said Michael Ghielmetti, president of

Signature Properties, a Pleasanton home builder. Ghielmetti believes the industry as a whole has "beaten into the ground" water and wine names in the Bay Area.

A new Signature development -- Abella in San Pablo -- is named for a prominent San Francisco missionary who established a farming outpost in the East Bay, according to company representatives.

"If names are too obscure or tough to pronounce, it can hurt you," Ghielmetti said. "Places like St. Francis Wood or Claremont -- those are timeless names. It's almost like being a politician. You want to be safe, but you want to have panache."

Pulte Homes has taken an edgier tack in its new condo complexes in Emeryville, where it hopes to attract hip 20- and 30-somethings. Across the street from Liquid Sugar is City Limits, a new townhouse development that straddles the Oakland-Emeryville border. A few blocks away, Pulte is building Elevation 22 -- named for the sea level at Powell and Hollis streets.

However, even names that hit the trifecta -- realistic, evocative and place-sensitive -- may not sway buyers.

"People buy a house not because of the name but because of where it is, whether it's big enough and the price point," said Alper.

That was certainly the case for management consultant Stephen Lefkovits. In December, Lefkovits and fiance Ann Fehrenbacher bought a 1,500-square-foot condo at Liquid Sugar for \$545,000 after realizing a comparable home in San Francisco would cost about 40 percent more.

"I don't really like the signs," he said, referring to the Liquid Sugar Drive sign at the entrance to the garage area. "But my fiance loves it."

At the same time, Lefkovits, 37, noted that most of his neighbors are proud of the name and refer to themselves as living not just in Emeryville, but in Liquid Sugar.

Even those in charge of building marketing campaigns gently mock the process.

Mike Howl, vice president of land acquisition, sales and marketing at Young California Homes, is moving from his company's America subdivision in American Canyon to Los Olivos in Livermore.

"I think it's kind of a silly name, actually, because there aren't any olive trees out there," Howl said. "It's mostly grapes."

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