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# Airpark News

FEBRUARY 2015

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of Desert Star  
Construction





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### on the cover:

Jerry Meek of  
Desert Star Construction

Cover photo by Sam Nalven





# SUSTAINABLE *Luxury*

By Jimmy Magahern

**Custom  
Homebuilder  
Jerry Meek  
Embraces  
Eco-Friendly  
Construction and  
His Company Is  
Reaping Green**



Jerry Meek calls his lavish, custom-built, luxury homes "personal resorts," and there's no better example of that lofty concept than the 25,000-square-foot mansion his company, Desert Star Construction (DSC), built for 2015 Baseball Hall of Famer Randy Johnson.

Like the 6-foot-10 former Diamondbacks pitcher himself, everything about Johnson's 5-acre Paradise Valley estate—now on the market for a cool \$25 million, reportedly the largest amount ever asked for a Valley home—is supersized. From the 20 stadium-style seats in the personal movie theater (complete with a working ticket booth, fully stocked snack bar and neon custom marquee) to the 1,746-square-foot gym, equipped with a locker room, showers and aisles of commercial-grade fitness equipment, everything was scaled up to avoid any bumping of bobblehead-immortalized heads. Elsewhere around the 5-acre Mediterranean-style home—which boasts seven bedrooms, 12 bathrooms and a detached two-bedroom guesthouse—is a guitar collector's showroom, outfitted with a recording studio and professionally lit stage (who

knew the Big Unit played?), an outdoor cabana with a wood-fired pizza oven, an indoor pet suite with a kennel and wash area, and a custom powder room with a fiber-optic ceiling depicting the stars over Arizona, complete with a chirping cricket soundscape.

"That was the largest home we'd ever done," says Meek, who adds that the Johnson home, built in 2006, involved Desert Star Construction and its subcontractors for 22 months. "There were days that we had 150 people working on that home. That takes a real collaboration between the team, the designers and the homeowners. And I tell you, his wife, Lisa, was amazing. With her ability to make decisions, stick with those decisions and provide clarity to the team, she was incredible to work with."

At some point, Randy and Lisa Johnson realized they were basically asking Meek and company to create a genuine resort. "The original plans ended up being a commercial-size project," says Lisa, in an email, describing the luxury house with the \$62,000 annual property tax bill the Johnsons decided to sell (they're downsizing, following their kids' admissions to college, to a \$3.9 mil-

lion, 8,000-square-foot house in North Scottsdale). "And we are not sure that any other contractor would have been able to provide us with such a professional, organized and creative product."

About the only thing the Johnsons didn't go for were the additive sustainability features Desert Star Construction, recognized as a leader in the local green building community, is known for. Meek says his company has done 17 LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified projects to date, adhering to the environmentally responsible standards developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, and two net-zero homes "that produce as much energy as they consume." But the Johnsons chose not to pursue LEED certification.

"It's always a discussion and education process," Meek concedes. "With many of the corporate executives we work with, their businesses are sustainable, but I think a lot of them have just never thought about doing it in their homes."

Meek, who was drawn towards sustainable building practices in the early '80s when "going green" was merely



Jerry Meek standing in the 20-person, stadium-style theater room featuring a working ticket booth, fully stocked snack bar and neon custom marquee.

referencing a paint color, says that even if his clients ax the green features, like solar panels and geothermal heating and cooling units, he'll sneak some green building practices into the mix.

"Our focus has been, let's build the home and work with the design teams to not use the energy in the first place," Meek says. "We can build a house that's 57 percent more efficient than a code-built home without any additive products—no solar, no solar hot water, no geothermal—by just building it correctly, orienting it the right way, and using the right windows and materials. That takes a lot of work, if you're building a house that's 10, 20 or 30,000 square feet. But it ultimately makes a difference. And that's what we're striving to do."

In the end, DSC still made a sustainability statement in the Johnsons' home by salvaging and reusing the majority of the original desert bedrock and Sonoran desert plant life dug up during construc-

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tion in the lush landscaping throughout the back yard.

"It takes a commitment from our clients," he says. "It's important to some, but not all. But it affects every one of us."

#### Desert Star Construction Team

Before stepping foot in the Johnson's home, a prospect must be able to sign a financial disclosure agreement providing proof they have the \$25 million to spend. But everyone who works at Desert Star Construction has already seen the place.

"We take the entire team to view the projects," says Meek. "We want these projects to be real to everybody, from our project managers to our receptionist and the people in our accounting department. We don't want them just processing numbers. We want them to know it's somebody's home, or office building or restaurant."

Meek's words go beyond a mere feel-good mission statement. Since founding the company in 1978 with his dad, the 86-year-old Gerald Meek Sr. (who retired at age 80 but still comes around occa-

sionally to check up on the family business), Meek, a native of Chicago who grew up in Phoenix, has retained a solid blue-collar ethic.

"I learned the carpentry business from my dad," he says. "At 16, I was building patio covers and additions for people's houses. Mostly I'd bug the kids at school, and their parents would hire me to do it."

Local architect George Christensen pushed the father and son team to pursue their general contractor's licenses, and from there, the Meeks formed a team of construction pros, project managers, labor foremen, superintendents and office personnel that Meek calls "Team DSC."

"It was a conscious decision not to put my name on the company," says Meek, now 56. "I wanted it to be a company that everybody could feel like they were an owner of. And we've just concentrated on building a team."

In 2008, at the height of the recession, Meek and his wife, Carol, who works as office manager, called that team together



Jerry Meek is the president of Desert Star Construction, recent winner of the 2014 Contractor Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Arizona.

for what many of them feared was bad news.

"We were seeing foreclosures, the economy tanked, we had \$26 million worth of work cancelled in a period of about 45 days," Meek recalls. "So I sat everybody on my team down and told them, 'From a practical side, if I were to start a business today, it wouldn't be a construction company. But I believe we have the best team in construction, we have the best clients, the best trade contractors and we work with the most talented design teams. So we're gonna figure out how to do things differently.'"

Meek reassured his employees that there were not going to be any layoffs. "I said, 'My commitment to you is, my wife and I aren't going to take a salary until this turns around,'" he recalls with a laugh. "That was a real brave and courageous statement, but none of us knew it was going to last as long as it did."

Nevertheless, DSC weathered the housing crash and came out of it with a new focus: sustainable luxury. With son Jeremy at the helm as a LEED Accredited


Professional (he received his master's degree in engineering for sustainable development from the University of Cambridge and now works as DSC's sustainability programs manager), Meek found there was still a market for luxury homes in the Valley—as long as clients could tap into incentives to offset costs (which exist in sustainable building) and include green building features to save on the steep energy bills those large, sprawling mansions generate. Within a year, DSC had completed the first LEED-certified home in Paradise Valley and the first LEED Gold-certified, full-service restaurant in the state, El Chorro Lodge.

"There were a lot of people doing green building in commercial projects, there were a lot of people doing this in production homes," Meek observes. "But we couldn't find anybody doing it in the luxury industry. So that really set us apart."

Meek says he's learned a lot about sustainability from his highly cultured clients, who often come up with their own innovative ideas.

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# Scottsdale Airpark Grand Opening



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"I remember once seeing a semi (truck) pull up on a job site full of old doors that had been taken out of a mission in Mexico, and I laughed," he recalls. "I didn't realize that the client wanted me to rebuild and reuse them. That was a watershed event for me personally, discovering that you could take these old materials and repurpose them. But I'll tell you: because our clients are so well-traveled, so intelligent and knowledgeable, we have to bring our A game every day... just to keep up with their expectations."

### Lap of Luxury

Meek has no trouble explaining why his company is located in the greater Scottsdale Airpark area.

"We live here, we eat out here and we think it's a great place to work," he says. "But more than that, we like building relationships with our clients and partners. And it's neat that I'm five minutes away from the architects that I work with, the interior designers, cabinet people, A/V companies, technology companies. Everybody's close."

It also helps that most of the clients he's built homes for are located nearby, between Paradise Valley and Silverleaf, especially because another perk of owning a high-end luxury home is receiving regular maintenance services and property management.

"We also have a concierge service: we take care of our client's homes after they move in," Meek says. "We don't buy groceries. We don't gas up your car. But we do make sure that everything is maintained systematically, so effectively our clients get to live in the home without burdening themselves with all the details. They do best when they're working in their field of expertise, not ours. We'll check after a storm to see if there's any water infiltration. In fact, we'll make sure that all the drains are clear before a storm; we're proactive."

Meek says those details are sometimes overlooked when a well-heeled executive or sports star is planning his or her personal resort. He acknowledges that his team has installed some wild features in homes, from seven-figure music listening rooms to a shooting range in a client's basement.

"We did one home that had a streetscape in it, and each of the children had a store named after them on the street," he says.

Fortunately for that family, Desert Star Concierge also provided its own street sweeping.

"When you're living at this level, everything needs maintenance," Meek explains. "Whether it's your brick driveway, the compressor for your wine room or your security system. With the level of technology in these homes, it takes maintenance. So it helps that we're never far away." ■

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### Greg Miskovsky

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