

THE DRIVE

magazine



issue 62

www.thedrivemagazine.com



\$3.95 Can.



The Right Stuff

TV star, multi-media icon and cutting edge developer, Mike Holmes - remains, at heart, what he's always been: A damn good - and honest - contractor. Just Ask him.

Story by Gavin MacDougall - Photography by Steve Pomerleau

The two-story building tucked into the corner of a somewhat hidden industrial crescent just off busy Kipling Avenue in Etobicoke hardly seems an appropriate home base for one of Canada's latest and greatest entertainment exports. Then again, its proprietor has never been one to put style ahead of substance.

This is the head office of The Holmes Group, the multi-media empire headed by renowned Canadian do-it-yourself wun-

derkind Mike Holmes. Thanks to the enormous success of the HGTV network's award-winning Holmes on Homes television show, which Holmes developed, starred in and produced for seven seasons, the Toronto native has spawned a multi-million dollar enterprise encompassing television shows, books, DVDs, branded clothing, advertising endorsements, personal appearances and now, nearest and dearest to

the heart of its owner, cutting-edge residential development projects. The building houses about a dozen staff and all the tools and materials used in the company's various endeavours, but space has grown considerably tighter over the past few years.

"Yeah, we kind of ran out (of space), oh probably three years ago," says Holmes with his trademark hearty laugh, while gazing at shelves packed with building materials and other supplies. "But, what to do

when you're just so damn busy. I

think we have to

build another

floor,



expand backwards, or move. We'll get around to it soon enough though."

In other words, renovations at company headquarters can wait awhile, thank you very much. After all, to be Mike Holmes these days is to be one of the busiest men in show business. Or is that one of the busiest men in the building and renovation business? Holmes, of course, prefers the latter, since he's the first to tell you – adamantly, in fact – that he's not a "TV guy."

"I know I have TV to thank for putting me in this position and for the success of our company," says Holmes. "But I can honestly say I don't care about TV. It (fame and celebrity) never was the reason I got into all of this and it's still not the reason now. TV was the forum, the medium, that allowed me to get across a message I've always felt was important. I still chuckle at people referring to me as a reality TV star! I'm a building contractor, period."

Regardless of how one classifies Mike Holmes these days, it's near-impossible to argue the fact that, of the hordes of modern-day celebrities who owe their ascent to reality TV, few have achieved as lasting fame and fortune as the 45-year old Holmes. Then again, few have as legitimate a talent as the brawny, clean-cut, overall-clad contractor; nor the seemingly universal audience ready and willing to tap that talent and knowledge.

Ten years ago the father of three was busy plying his trade as the owner/operator of Restovate, a small renovation company working the Greater Toronto Area. Fifteen years into the industry by then, Holmes had seen enough

"bad renovations" to fill a "decade's worth of (Holmes on Homes) shows." It was those experiences, as well as lessons learned from his father – who first impressed upon Mike the importance of "doing something right" – that Holmes began plotting the basic parameters of Holmes on Homes. It was around this same time he landed a set-building gig on Just Ask Jon Eakes, HGTV's home improvement show. Toward the end of that first season Holmes was given a few short on-air segments, and took to the camera so well the show's producer immediately began thinking "spin-off."

Holmes says his "big mouth" had a lot to do with sowing the seeds of what would become Holmes on Homes. The idea for the show

had been with him for some time when he struck up a conversation

with HGTV producers, where he let loose on what he saw as the biggest ailments of the home building and renovation industry.

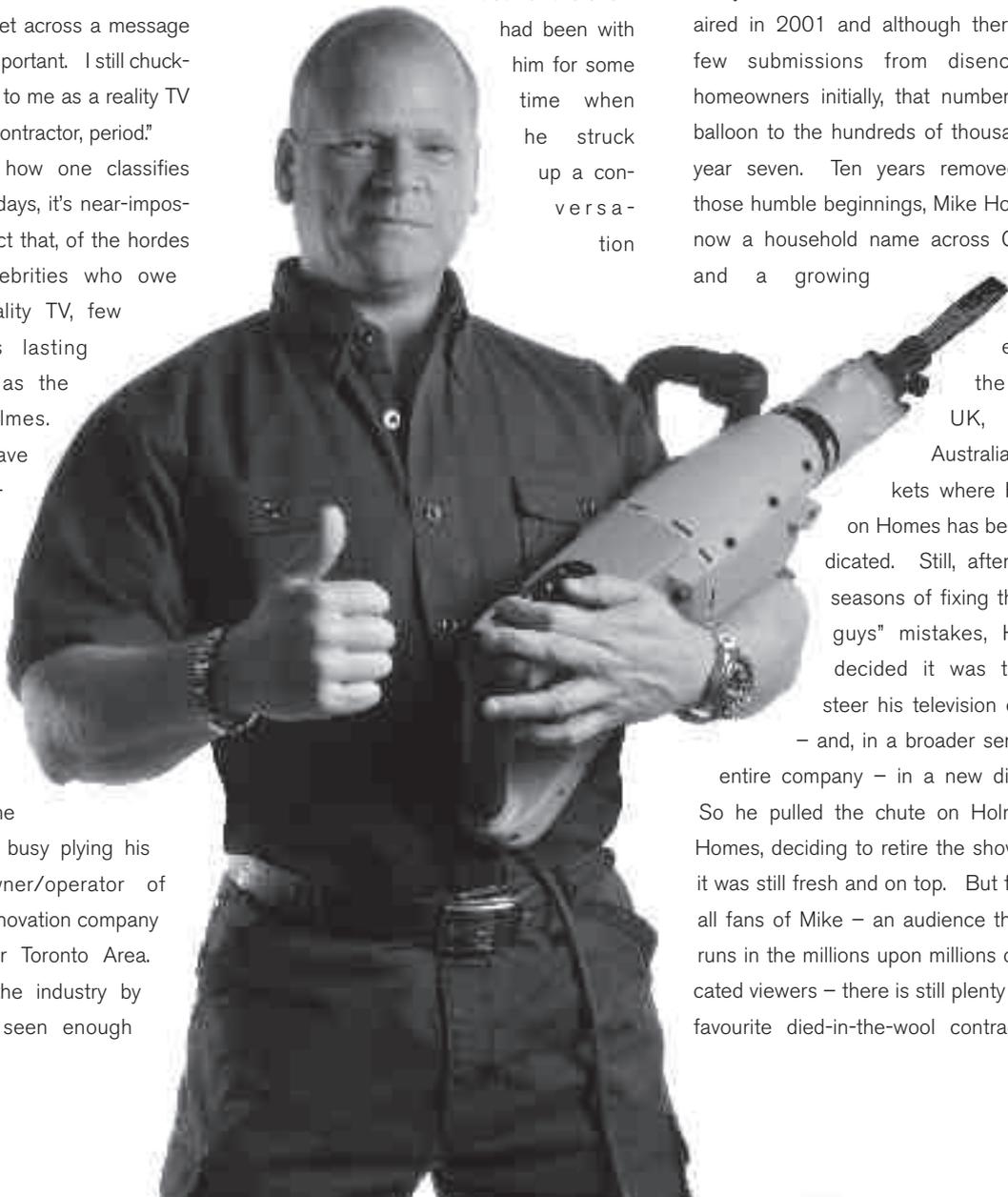
"I basically outlined the premise for a show that would feature a contracting team helping homeowners who'd been screwed over by unscrupulous or simply incompetent renovators and contractors," he recalls. "I wasn't even thinking of myself as the guy who would be that contractor."

I just told them that I had seen so much bad stuff over the course of my career that I felt this was the kind of show homeowners would want to see and learn from. I guess they liked the idea because they asked for a pilot about an hour after listening to me blab-on about it!"

The Mike Holmes phenomenon was ready for launch. Holmes on Homes first aired in 2001 and although there were few submissions from disenchanted homeowners initially, that number would balloon to the hundreds of thousands by year seven. Ten years removed from those humble beginnings, Mike Holmes is now a household name across Canada, and a growing

presence in the US, UK, and Australian markets where Holmes on Homes has been syndicated. Still, after seven seasons of fixing the "bad guys" mistakes, Holmes decided it was time to steer his television exploits – and, in a broader sense, his

entire company – in a new direction. So he pulled the chute on Holmes on Homes, deciding to retire the show while it was still fresh and on top. But fear not all fans of Mike – an audience that now runs in the millions upon millions of dedicated viewers – there is still plenty of your favourite died-in-the-wool contractor to



see on the tube. Indeed, Mike Holmes isn't going anywhere. He's just getting bigger.

Later this month, Holmes lands in Windsor for the 28th annual Windsor Home & Leisure Show, courtesy of LaSalle's Meloche Windows and Doors. He'll be making two appearances on the Sunday segment of the Show, preaching the same "common sense" principals and philosophies he first learned from his father, and which he's promoted since launching his first renovation company at age 19. In advance of his visit to the city of roses, THE DRIVE caught up with Mike Holmes in his T.O. digs to talk about, amongst other things, the dizzying success of the Holmes Group, where the company heads from here, his celebrity status, green homes, and of course, the importance of "Making it Right."

TDM: With Holmes on Homes having wrapped production after seven seasons, is it a little easier being Mike Holmes these days?

MH: Do you mean are we less busy now? Hardly! (laughing). Actually, it seems we've got more on the go than ever; even when we were doing the show. But you won't hear me complain. I've been very fortunate that the success of the show has put me in position to pursue the kinds of projects I want and what I think is best for our company; things like the residential development projects we've in the works, our foundation for the trades and our charity work. Plus, we've got the new show we're launching and our specials; like what we did in New Orleans.

TDM: That, of course, is the Holmes in New Orleans special airing this month; which, we might add, had you rubbing shoulders with the likes of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. What was that like?

MH: They're great people. You know, so often you read or hear about all the crap in the tabloids about people like them, but they really are down-to-earth people. Yeah, they're incredibly successful at what they do and they've got lots of money, but do you think they'd be doing what they're doing in New Orleans – which is helping people in that city get their lives back – if they didn't give a damn. They stepped up to the plate and that's what makes a difference in our world; when people decide to do something about a problem.

TDM: How did the whole New Orleans thing with them come about?

MH: Well, we had heard that Brad Pitt had formed an organization called Make It Right New Orleans so we were obviously intrigued by what they were doing because "Make It Right" is trademarked by our company and it's what we've always been associated with; right from our very beginning. But we didn't approach them because we were pissed off they were using our trademark slogan. Anyone who knows anything about me or my company knows that's simply not what we're about. What intrigued us was the work they were look-

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ing to do in an area still very much devastated three years later by Hurricane Katrina. So we started communicating with them to the point where I was so impressed with Brad Pitt himself, and this idea he had. Here was a guy putting his own time and money into this idea of helping these hurricane victims who three years later still didn't have a home. We knew what they were doing was something we could help with and we wanted to get involved.

TDM: But you also saw it as an opportunity for great television too?

MH: We did, but not initially. When we decided it was time to call it quits for Holmes on Homes we knew we still wanted to do special shows that borrowed some of the same themes and aspects of the show. The opportunity to document this special project, and this very unique house we were building in New Orleans, while showing viewers the problems that are still ongoing down there, was right in line with the kinds of television specials we want to continue doing. So yeah, it was a natural fit with our plans moving forward.

TDM: Share with us what the New Orleans build experience was like?

MH: It was tough. We had three months of rainstorms and just brutal heat, but it was all worth it! It was ten times the project we ever did on Holmes on Homes because we basically did everything involved with building an entire house – from planning straight through to the finishing touches. Our build was right in the most devastated area of city, the Lower 9th Ward; and I have to tell you, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw the first time I visited the Lower 9th Ward. The devastation looked like it had just happened. There was little sign of rebuilding, no infrastructure, and no plans in place to get people back into their homes. It was a huge challenge for me and my crew, but

it was also one of the most inspiring and rewarding experiences of my life."

TDM: What is different about the house you built in New Orleans?

MH: We've simply built a better house. It's much like what we're doing with our new sustained home development projects outside Toronto and Calgary. The whole process was to keep it affordable but to build a house that will stand the test of time. It's unfortunate that it takes a catastrophe, and people dying, to affect change in how we do things; but that's what happened in New Orleans. Unfortunately there are still so many contractors down there who only go half way. Well, we went all the way. These houses won't mold and they won't get blown down. Even if the levee breaks again, these houses will stand.

TDM: Let's talk a bit more about the decision to end your flagship show. You took this little idea for a reality show and saw Holmes on Homes evolve to what can now be safely called an international hit. That said, why did you decide now was the time to pull the plug on the show?

MH: Well, I don't think we necessarily pulled the plug on the show as much as our company, The Holmes Group, has evolved. We're still heavily involved in television and will be launching our new Holmes Inspections series this fall, something we're really excited about. And we still plan on doing specials – like the New Orleans shows - that will involve many or most of the kinds of things our audiences liked about Holmes on Homes.

Why did we decide to stop ongoing production though? You know, seven seasons is a long time in the television industry, especially for the kind of show we did. People don't realize the work that goes on behind the scenes filming a show like Holmes on Homes. We did a lot of great things with the show and helped a lot of people, but we just felt it was time for

some new challenges for our company.

TDM: When you were doing the show, how long would a shoot last?

MH: It was usually about a year for each season, with two or three shows being filmed at the same time. We'd do thirteen episodes so we were basically spending one month for each show. Don't get me wrong, we had a blast doing the show. But it was a tough, grinding schedule for sure.

TDM: Through the seven seasons of Holmes on Homes you developed this reputation among some viewers as a sort of superhero coming into save the day of the distraught homeowner. This seemed to be something the media played up quite a bit, but did you consider yourself such?

MH: No, never. That's all been mostly media hype about what we were doing. I've never considered myself, or thought of myself as a hero; nor have my crew. Like I've always said, my intent with the show was to inform and educate homeowners that these things are happening out there and that you have to be willing to learn about them in order to stay clear of the same thing happening to you. If by doing what we do gives me the opportunity to help change the building industry and helps make people more aware, then great. I'll do anything I have to do to make that happen.

TDM: You did about a hundred renovations during the Holmes on Homes run. Was there ever a job you and your crew couldn't handle; something that was way beyond repair that forced you to say thanks, but no thanks to the homeowner?

MH: You know, there were some close calls over the years, where we basically were asking ourselves "what the hell have we gotten into here?" But we always came through in the end. That's a credit to the crew and the trades that have been a part of what we've done with these projects.

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TDM: So, looking back, what would you say was the toughest job you had to complete on the show?

MH: Well, several come to mind, but I think the one most of our viewers would point to is the house we re-built from the ground up. That was our Christmas special show from the last season and it was just a mess. The family had been completely screwed-over by someone they thought was a friend, and their house was falling apart as a result of the work this so-called "friend" did. They were on the verge of bankruptcy, and this guy had a half-million dollar lien on their home! I remember my colleagues on the show and the network were telling me to "run away," but we couldn't let that family live with the mess this guy had left them. So we levelled the house and re-built it. Four thousand square feet and about four hundred grand later, they had their home, and more importantly, their lives back. We took a bit of a hit on that one though (laughing)!

TDM: A usual part of every episode was you going off – or as you've often referred to it, "getting excited," about the shoddy work done by contractors. What would you say was the thing that bothered you most about all the bad work you saw?

MH: It was probably the complete lack of patience and caring I would see from some contractors, and even the homeowners. I mean, we would fix these houses and it's not like we were doing rocket science. We just took the time to do it right. We cared about the work we were doing. We did the work like it was our friggin' house. Through every episode it never ceased to amaze me how a contractor could live with work they knew was sub-standard. I mean, for the amount of time it would have taken to do the job right, these contractors would have saved their clients a lot of heartache, a lot of money, and they would have saved the irreparable damage to their company's reputation.

So I would get frustrated because these families were being affected big-time and there were no laws to protect them. I'm sure me "going-off" had some entertainment value but I can tell you I was never trying to entertain. I was just really pissed off!

TDM: You've certainly railed against a fair number of contractors over the years, both on the show and in the press. As a result, some have criticized that your comments have given even good contractors a bad rap. Is the industry that rife with poor contractors and renovators?

MH: Most of the industry consists of companies that are good companies, honest companies, companies that do things right the first time. But you'd be surprised at some of the others that are out there. Some of the stuff I've seen, even well before I ever did the show, would make your head spin. People think that it's all really bad, unscrupulous contractors, but that's not the case. The majority of these guys just don't know enough and just don't care enough to learn more. I've said this before: in this industry, there's a difference between the bad and the ugly. The ugly are those trained professionals – they'll take you every time. Some of these guys just don't give a crap. Others, I think, just don't have the talent to educate homeowners about what they really need. So, as a result you get some guys looking to take short cuts instead of just doing things right. I guess that's what disappoints me most about some of the players in this industry.

TDM: But you always stopped short of naming the guilty parties on the show, right?

MH: Believe me, there were plenty of times I would have loved to drop names so that people wouldn't even think of hiring that contractor again. The problem is that there remains zero accountability in the industry. Our governments protect contractors more than they do consumers.

So, you get some contractors who just don't give a damn and almost seem like trained professionals ready to screw people over. They can change the name of their company the very next day, so what are you left with: a long list of bad contracting companies. Yet the "bad guys" are still in business, screwing over another fresh victim. Until we find a way to change those laws to better protect homeowners, it's going to always be "buyer beware." That's why we need to educate homeowners.

TDM: So it would be safe to say you're not on the Christmas card list of too many contractors in the Toronto area?

MH: I never figured from the start that I'd be on too many (laughing). But most contractors liked the show and the kinds of things we're doing because they're the ones doing things the right way. So maybe they would send (Christmas) cards! Obviously, the bad ones wouldn't because I don't think they ever particularly cared for what we revealing about them!

TDM: How did Holmes on Homes change your life and your business?

MH: Well, I thought I was busy when I was just doing renovations, but things got a lot worse on that end! Of course, the success of the show and our business has allowed me the freedom to do more of the kinds of things I've wanted to do; most specifically our sustained housing developments that we feel can significantly change the industry. Of course, the popularity you get from having a hit TV show changes things whether you like it or not. I've said before it's all very surreal to walk anywhere and be recognized by almost everyone. It's surprising at first and does take some getting used to; knowing that you're no longer just an average person that people won't recognize. But it's all been a very positive experience, and I like to think it hasn't changed me. My family and friends tell me I'm still the same guy, and they'd be the first to say if I wasn't staying grounded through all of this!

TDM: Your introduction to the construction trade has often been described in almost mythical tones, mostly along the lines of "legend has it you were swinging a hammer with your father on actual jobs when you were age six." Stuff like that. Did you actually get your start that early?

MH: Actually, I did. As far back as I can remember I was a kid who loved seeing how things worked. So what my father did for a living was right up my alley. My father was a jack-of-all-trades but master-of-none type of construction guy. Above all else though, he had great integrity and pride in his work. He was the hugest proponent of doing things right the first time; of doing things with integrity and honesty. It's such a simple concept you'd think more people would buy into it! I was just enthralled with his talents so



The image shows the logo for Palazzi Oriental Rugs Inc. The logo features a large, stylized letter 'P' in a dark, bold font. To the right of the 'P', the word 'Palazzi' is written in a white, cursive script font, and 'Oriental Rugs Inc' is written below it in a white, sans-serif font. The background of the logo is a black and white photograph of a living room interior. In the foreground, there is a large, patterned rug. In the background, there are two dark leather armchairs flanking a small, dark wood coffee table. The room has large windows in the background, letting in light.

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A black and white photograph of a family of five. From left to right: a young girl with long dark hair, a man in a white shirt, a woman with long dark hair, a young boy in a patterned shirt, and another young girl. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a dark, textured wall.

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Going Green The Holmes Way

Mike Holmes says if you're going to go green, go green all the way. The renowned contractor of Holmes on Home fame has taken his company, The Holmes Group, into the eco-development business big-time. The company's development division, Holmes Homes, has started initial phases of projects just outside of Toronto, and two near Calgary, featuring what Holmes boldly calls "the best built and environmentally friendly homes in the world."

The developments have certainly been greatly anticipated, since Holmes has talked of doing this kind of enviro-home constructing for years, and in fact built his first such home near the completion of Holmes on Homes sixth and final season for a homeowner who's original house was so badly renovated Holmes and his crew had no option but to tear it down and start over.

"These are the kinds of homes people have told me they want," says Holmes. "Everybody in this day and age is thinking green, but the question is what shade of green? There is confusion about what constitutes "green" construction. There are light shades and dark shades of green and what we're building is, in my opinion, as dark green as it gets! I say if you're going to go green, go all the way and going all the way means building energy-efficient homes to last, using non-toxic, sustainable materials and incorporating renewable energy sources. We've designed homes with environmentally superior materials, have excellent indoor air quality, utilize solar hot water heating, and have accessible green roofs with rainwater recapture."

Holmes concedes the houses, which he says are built to last 100-years, will be about 10 to 20 percent more but insists they will produce substantial energy and utility savings for homeowners for years to come.

"We're using concrete, and lots of it, to build these houses," says Holmes. "Concrete is one of the best options to build with because its made of natural materials and is 100 per cent recyclable. It's also non-toxic, water repellent, and doesn't need sealants or even paint. Because of its high thermal mass it keeps your house warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer; thus saving you energy costs."

Concrete is also healthier, Holmes adds. In addition to not requiring toxic chemicals, building without using traditional framing and insulation also eliminates all air borne dust – a boon for allergy or asthma sufferers.

Holmes intends to follow-up these initial green development projects with several others across Canada and the US. "We're serious about making a lasting impact in the home building business with these kinds of developments," he says. "We have the knowledge and the skill to build these kinds of houses and we want to show the industry how to do it. We think there's no reason why these kinds of houses can't become the standard for the future. Think about it: who wouldn't want a house that will not burn down, fall down or mould, and that is totally environmentally friendly?" **TDM**

he started teaching me some of the things he was doing and I just took it from there. He taught me a lot about construction, but more importantly, he taught me that if I was going to do something, I should do it right the first time. That is the most important lesson he taught me and I live by it to this day. My whole "Make It Right" slogan was born from the philosophy my father passed on to me.

TDM: You seem supremely confident in front of the camera. Have you always had that kind of confidence?

Holmes: No, not at all. I was actually a very shy and quiet guy in school. I got into plays in grade school, but I was still a very shy kid. But I guess as I got older that kind of changed, didn't it!

TDM: You've always been a hands-on guy in all of your shows, which is somewhat the opposite of what one sees from a general contractor. Why are you different?

MH: I think it's because I take total ownership of a project as if it was my own house I was fixing. I don't see any other way you can look at any project if you're in this business.

TDM: Three years ago you launched The Holmes Foundation to support the training of youth in the skilled trades. How has this grown since?

MH: It's been awesome. The purpose of The Holmes Foundation is to encourage young people to enter the building trades as well as to assist those who have been impoverished by bad renovations. One of the most frustrating things for me is not being able to help everyone who has asked us for help. Even with Holmes on Homes no longer filming, we still get inundated with requests for help. Every month thousands of Canadians write me and tell me about renovation horror stories. I wish I could help everyone who writes me by doing the repairs they need

but I can't; there are just too many people who have been ripped off by incompetent or fraudulent contractors. So what I'm trying to do through the Foundation is help generate more interest in the trades in Canada. If we had enough good contractors committed to making it right we wouldn't have all these renovation nightmares. Through the Holmes Foundation I try to encourage Canadian students to consider a career in the trades and encourage them to do it right.

TDM: The trades – like similar career choices – have been tagged as an undesirable option for young people over the years. Why is that and how do you go about

changing that perception?

MH: We need to show young people that working in the trades can be creative, lucrative and rewarding. Unfortunately many people still think that being a tradesperson means that you will be doing hard labour your whole life, and that's just not true anymore. Technology has revolutionized many trades, making them less labour intense. Also, an experienced tradesperson has many potential career paths: they can work for themselves, work for a larger company, teach, or work in managements.

TDM: It's widely known that the Holmes Group is getting into the development game big time, particularly with environmentally-enhanced and sustained housing. Your new green home projects are getting a lot of buzz in the industry. Tell us about them.

MH: The development projects have been front and centre with us for several years now. We have the knowledge and technology to build these kinds of sustainable homes and it's a project we are psyched about bringing to the market. Everyone's talking about "green homes" these days but there are different shades of green out there! The homes we're

building are going to be "greener" than anyone's ever seen. We're building what we consider the world's best homes for the public. There are two communities we're building simultaneously in Calgary and just outside Toronto. No one has ever seen homes like these. These are homes that won't burn down, fall down, or get blown down. They are more environmentally friendly and energy efficient than anything that has ever been built. And it's only about 10 per cent more than the other pieces of crap out there. But you're going to get your money back in the first five years.

TDM: You once said, just after Holmes on Homes launched, that you hoped to do the show and this kind of thing for five years, and then that would be it. It's now going on nine years and you've got more on your plate than ever? Any revised prognostications?

MH: I did think five years and that would be it. But now I'm like the Hotel California: it looks like I can never leave! But that's okay. Hey, I'm having a blast and I still feel there is so much more for our company to do. My focus has always been being a good contractor who does good work and helps change the perception of the profession. My goal has been to raise awareness about what's happening, and that it's not normal. It's totally wrong. Now we want to show the world how better houses can be built; houses that are better for our environment and better for us as a human species. The way we see it, we've got lots left to accomplish.

TDM: And all the right way, right?

MH: Is there any other way? **TDM**

