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Travel

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Busting the bubble

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Special to The Examiner

"It's the perfect icebreaker," says Tom Courtney, project manager for Four Seasons Jackson Hole in Wyoming, open in December 2004.

"It gives us the flexibility to change the plans as each phase is sold, according to the desires of our existing owner John Shafer, building of some of the top resorts in Mexico.

The miracle device? Topographical models covered in Plexiglas, known in the business as "bubbles." Ranging from a few square feet to 6 feet by 12 feet, bubbles are 3-D representations of resorts, their grounds and amenities. They also provide doll-house-like representations of individual villas and floor plans.

Bubbles are used at both on-site and off-site sales centers, sometimes because the resort being sold has yet to be built, the resort being sold is hundreds of miles from the showroom, in another state or even another country. They have been home to sales centers marketing timeshares in Mexico, Lake Tahoe, Southern California and Hawaii.

Melvin Denny Ako is one of the leading bubble builders. His clients have included Hilton, Four Seasons and Park Hyatt in his 20-year-long career. One of his models of a Hawaiian resort was even flown to Japan to be shown to investors on the trip.

Ako's models also often appear in brochures, advertisements and as illustrations in articles. As often as possible, he has his bubbles photographed outside in natural light to create the most realistic effect.

He compares his part of the construction process to the architects who built models of the Great Pyramids for the Egyptians. Bubbles supply a visual orientation that isn't always clear from a blueprint. Sight-lines, a sense of arrival, and the amenities often aren't clear until crafted into three dimensions. A barbecue area may be too close to a parking garage, for instance. And, if plans change, the model can be changed, too.

Sometimes the only way to truly grasp the scope of a project is via a bubble. R Wildhorse Ranch is a 14,000-acre property 35 miles east of Red Bluff.

Much of the land is undeveloped and ideal for fishing, hiking, camping and dirt-biking. A small part is dedicated to houses and RV campsites.

Standing in front of the bubble, seeing 3 square feet of developed area on a 72-square-foot model, gives you a sense of how big 14,000 acres is.

Courtney says the bubble for Jackson Hole is a magnet, attracting the curious and drawing people into the info

But, like everything else in life, technology may be spelling the end to bubbles.

Ed Kinney of Marriott Vacation Club International says computer-aided-design videos are the future. A CD or D timeshare condo, "complete with candles flickering around the tub and birds flying in the background" creates an experience for potential buyers, he says. CAD demos are also faster to produce, cheaper, and can show the evolution of property from raw land to developed resort. If the plans change, the computer program can quickly be adapted.

Ako, for one, isn't worried about losing his job any time soon, though. "People relate better to the three-dimensional brochure," he says. "You don't buy a car off the brochure."

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