

Home Builder, 81, Leaves a Legacy: PONTY: Home Builder

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Carthay Landmarks

Home Builder, 81, Leaves a Legacy

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Spyros George Ponty may forget a name or two on occasion, but he never forgets a face. And he never forgets a house.

"You know, I remember everybody that bought a house from me," Ponty said. "I meet people at the Music Center or someplace, and they come up and embrace me and say, 'Oh, Ponty.'"

"They say, 'Oh, you wouldn't remember me.' So I take my notebook out and I draw the sketch of their house. They're amazed I can. But that was my bread and butter in those days," he said.

What Ponty casually dismissed as "those days" is a building career that spanned 34 years, several thousand homes and most of Los Angeles, a career of craftsmanship and hard work and pride in his creations.

From 1929 until his eyesight began to fail in 1963, Ponty built homes in Westwood and Norwalk, Beverly Hills, South-Central Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. He built for young World War II veterans

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Spyros George Ponty, who spent 34 years as a builder, recalls "those days" of creating neighborhoods.

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PONTY: Home Builder

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with tight budgets and growing families, and he built for well-to-do professionals. He built army barracks and military chapels, economical tracts and elegant residences.

One of the first neighborhoods created by Ponty was South Carthay, some 11 blocks of Spanish Colonial Revival homes currently under consideration for historic landmark status.

The West Los Angeles community, bounded by La Cienega, Olympic, Crescent Heights and Pico boulevards, is a special neighborhood. Its 147 homes of red tile roofs and graceful arches, thick stucco walls and glazed tile decorations are unique, because Ponty built each one differently.

"We never built the same house," he said. "There is always room for improvement. I could see development and improvement, because I listened to the people.

"For instance, you would come in with your husband and look around. I didn't say, 'This was the living room.' You knew that was the living room, or the kitchen. But you criticized the wall space, or the window space. Maybe the window was in the wrong place. So I listened, and that's how I learned."

Ponty created the homes with architect Alan Ruoff, taking cues from the needs of his clients and from his own experiences.

"I used to make my own sketches. I used cutouts for the furniture, so I could figure the wall space, you know," he said. "So, if I built for somebody, I made it (the home) to fit the furniture. Then I would take the sketch to Ruoff, and he would do the exteriors.

"And Ruoff used to get so upset," the 81-year-old builder laughed, slapping his work-worn hands on his knees at remembered battles.

"He'd say, 'An architect is supposed to design a house from the inside out.' But I'd say, 'Alan, you've never been in a kitchen. You don't know what a kitchen should be like. I know.'"

Immigrated From Greece in 1916

Ponty, who lives in Bel-Air, moved to the United States from Greece in 1916. He spent many years as a restaurateur, as "the assistant business manager to Cecil B. DeMille's business manager" and as a real estate salesman, before he entered the building business.

As a real estate salesman, Ponty saw "so-called builders" construct foundations for homes to building code specifications, laying two bars of steel in the concrete forms. But after the forms were inspected, he said, the builders would remove the steel bars to save money.

"It seemed so wrong to me," he said. "Those guys were bragging about saving money, taking out the two bars of steel and fooling the man that made the living for them, that bought the house. It was so wrong.

"Now, in Greece, when they build a house, a group comes from the northern part of Greece, six or seven artists. They come in and set up a tent by the side, and do their own cooking and cut the timber and let it dry and get the granite blocks for the foundation and build the house," Ponty said.

When they get to the roof, the natives go up to the roof and dance with them and bring them presents—a



Ponty Climbs stairway of his home. He says he learned about home design by taking cues from his clients.

pair of home-woven socks, a handkerchief, 10 cents' worth of tobacco—to show their appreciation to these artisans, because they were proud of it.

"Now, how could you show that appreciation to these crooks that were taking the steel out, right? So, because of this background in my family, I thought that was wrong, and so I decided to go into the building business," he said.

Ponty's care and craftsmanship were not reserved for custom-built homes like those in South Carthay. The more modest housing tracts he built for young World War II veterans received the same interest and concern. After the war, Ponty spent eight months of research to design a small, affordable home for young soldiers with growing families.

\$48 down and \$42 a Month

"They couldn't afford to buy," he said. "They couldn't afford to buy a stove; refrigerator, garbage disposal. So I put in eight months of research work and I developed a little house—750 square feet, two bedrooms, stove, refrigerator, garbage disposal, clothesline in the back yard, incinerator and a fence in the back yard—\$6,950: \$48 down and \$42 a month for everything."

Ponty built those homes in Norwalk and the San Fernando Valley. They were in such demand that he soon became "the largest builder in the San Fernando Valley. I built more homes than anyone else."

His homes still fill Los Angeles neighborhoods today, a fact he stresses often.

"You ask me how many of my homes are still standing?" he spluttered with good-natured indignation. "Still standing? They're gonna be standing long after you and your grandchildren are gone.

"Forever," he said.