

# HOUSE games

Virtual tours and slick discs are beginning to revolutionize the housing industry

## HOMEFRONT



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**A** smart techie with finely tuned marketing smarts is on his way to transforming the way folks shop for a new home.

Blake Batson, the 42-year-old founder of ZIM Technologies, has successfully transplanted gaming technology to the business world, refining computer programming that allows participants to click and take a virtual tour through a new home.

Think about your child's favourite computer game and you get the idea. But instead of picking off bad guys in a dark castle, Batson lets buyers walk through rooms that are weeks and months away from construction.

"There is free movement and you can easily visualize what the finished home will look like," says Batson, who first came across an early version of the program when a colleague was working in a federal department charged with renovating government offices in late 2003.

Batson, who had already sold ZIM Technologies to Ottawa entrepreneur Michael Cowpland, bought the home-tour technology company and the programmers that went with it. He then pumped \$1 million into the operations to make the program more interactive and fluid.

3Vista was launched in April 2004 and very quickly the successful technology entrepreneur signed up his first client, Dharma Developments, a new housing company owned by Akash and Katy Sinha.

"We were both small startup companies and hit it off," says Batson, who has stepped away from the daily operation of 3Vista to try his hand at running for city councillor in the November election.

Batson saw a gaping niche in the housing industry: how to help buyers really feel and see a home when it is still just lines on paper.

The Sinhas were building 29 townhomes in Stittsville, but were months away from having a model.

Instead, they installed 3Vista's virtual tour in their sales trailer and potential buyers grabbed a joystick instead of walking through an actual model.

Earlier this year, Dharma and 3Vista won the Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association award for best new marketing product for 2006.

"I would say the virtual tour accelerated the sales process," says Katy Sinha. Seventeen of the 29 townhomes have been sold since



Blake Batson is the CEO of 3Vista, a company producing advanced 3D visualization software.

the virtual tour became available in February and the couple no longer plans to build a model.

"This was our first project and people are naturally apprehensive," says Sinha. "People are used to the traditional ways of buying and visiting model homes on the weekend. The technology gave them confidence in what we were doing."

"The technology saved us time and money," she says.

Construction of the townhomes started in late April and the first buyers moved in earlier this week.

Now the Sinhas are planning a second project of 38 stacked townhomes on Stittsville's Main Street. The project will offer environmental smarts, an historical edge and commercial space, and the couple plans to use a new, more sophisticated genera-

tion of 3Vista's virtual tours instead of a model home.

The technology has also won favour with bigger builders in town, including Urbandale, the Regional Group, Domicile and Mattamy Homes.

Mattamy Homes, Canada's largest builder, is working with 3Vista to design a virtual tour for a new line of three-storey townhomes with rear lanes planned for Kanata. Mattamy, a newcomer to Ottawa, opened five model homes last month and has already signed 90 sales.

"This is a product that helps visually demonstrate what you are going to get," says Troy Van Haastrecht, president of Mattamy's Ottawa operations. "In our particular case, we did not have the opportunity to build a townhouse model in Kanata."

"These are new products to Ottawa

Urbandale has given away more than 2,000 of these smart discs to buyers.



and the virtual tour is a great supplement to help people understand." Mattamy and 3Vista will also work together to design a virtual tour of townhomes planned for Barrhaven and homes in Orléans.

Over in the Urbandale offices, President Richard Sachs is a dedicated fan of virtual tours and has developed a sophisticated web site ([www.urbandale.com](http://www.urbandale.com)) that packs information with feeling. And for the past couple of years he has been experimenting with developing a series of slick computer discs that will cut into the production of sales brochures and floor plans.

You can still take away an armload of paper, but staff at Urbandale's offices in Riverside South, Bridlewood and the company's series of stacked Jazz townhomes are also giving visitors discs to explore on their home computer.

Everything you ever wanted to know about Urbandale is on the discs, including guarantees, available colours for brick, floor plans, sharp photographs, neighbouring playgrounds and the chance for kids to colour and adults to play with their furniture in the rooms of the home they are thinking about buying.

The discs are the product of Urbandale and Ryan McAuley, the technology smarts behind Image Bender, an Ottawa advertising company.

"We have so much to tell our purchasers and the discs can include so much information," says Sachs, adding the movement away from paper toward discs and computer power coincides neatly with Urbandale's mandate from the Energy Star program to be environmentally friendly.

It also makes good business sense, helping buyers explore all of the options at home, then head back to the models and the sales centre to seal the deal.

Urbandale has given more than 2,000 smart discs to buyers. Earlier this month, it released a new disc detailing their Jazz townhomes in the Kanata community of Village Green. Now you can walk through the models, and later refresh your brain with information and floor plans on two sides of glossy paper or slip a Jazz Your World disc into your computer. Within seconds, you can tap on an icon for placing furniture and start moving big and small pieces into the bedroom or living room.

It's all entertainment, education and smart business.

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