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How This **NEW BUILDER** Is Striving to Be **GREEN**



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Based in Markham, Ontario, DiGreen Homes is a high-end, family-owned builder serving the Greater Toronto Area. It was established in 2013, after President Abubakar Masood had already been involved in the industry for 13 years. His father was a builder, and his grandfather was as well.



Written by Samita Sarkar

Masood, a third-generation builder, entered the industry himself as a silent investor, and in 2005 began purchasing rural plots of land, creating plans, and selling to builders under DiGram Developments with his father, uncle, and brother. Eight years later, the Masoods created their sister company, DiGreen Homes, dedicated to creating a small number of high-end, eco-friendly communities every year.

“We wanted to capture the whole chain, going from agricultural properties to over to the final product, which is the constructed home,” Masood tells Construction in Focus.

Now, DiGreen specializes in building a select number of high quality, low-rise residential properties, such as townhomes, singles, and semi-detached homes, although the experienced team has expertise in both residential and commercial construction and is planning a commercial project in Markham called DiGreen Square. Luxury and environmental efficiency are signatures of the DiGreen brand.

But because DiGreen’s niche is to focus on quality over quantity, don’t expect DiGreen to be selling alongside major production builders (who construct thousands of homes per year) anytime soon. ►►



► “When we started, we didn’t want to build a cookie-cutter house. We want our product to stand out. I don’t want to become a production house builder; I don’t want to do 5,000 houses a year. Because we pay attention to the little details, we do a few hundred homes. I’d like to get up to the 500 houses per year mark. I think that’s the sweet spot,” explains Masood.

Masood clearly remembers setting up to build DiGreen’s first home in Markham. When deciding on pricing, he decided to go a bit lower than the competition, considering a home is the biggest investment of a person’s life, and the DiGreen brand was still unknown at the time. Masood had already decided that the company would be offering a superior product, but it was during that meeting that the team decided to take it one step further. “I still remember that day. We were talking about the

price point, between the \$1.1 to \$1.3 million-dollar mark. During that conversation, it was decided that we want to increase our standards even more, because all of us wanted to sleep well at night knowing we had produced a product that speaks for itself. So we introduced even higher standards,” he recalls.

Masood committed to upgrading the elevation as well as all of the home’s baseboards, and even introducing beautiful coffered ceilings in some of the rooms as standard.

“Our product speaks quality. We put in the extra effort, and we give you a higher standard.”

Since its inception, DiGreen has been offering high ceilings (9 and 10 feet) as standard in all homes, while most builders offer these as upgrades, if at all. Rather than pinewood staircases, DiGreen also offers high quality hardwood flooring materials. Other flooring materials, such as 12” x 12” or 12” x 16” tiles—upgrades for DiGreen’s competition—are standard as well. Double-pane windows that keep homes naturally cooler in summer and warmer in winter are used at all times, and heat recovery vent systems help create an eco-friendly product that saves home owners money in the long-term.



In addition to these standards, DiGreen also offers upgrades, and they are above and beyond what the major home builders consider luxury. “With DiGreen’s upgrades, you’re almost at the cusp of custom building,” Masood states.

In the Residences of 16th Avenue community, a townhome community currently under construction in Markham, DiGreen is creating three-storey homes with 9-foot ceilings on the first floor, 10-foot ceilings on the second or “kitchen” floor, and 8-foot ceilings (standard



for most builders) on the bedroom floor alone. To minimize the effects of heating the environment, DiGreen has made an effort to reduce the amount of asphalt and pavement in the community as much as possible. It is using permeable paving on driveways, which is more environmentally friendly, better for drainage, and easier to maintain.

"I don't think I would be able to fall asleep knowing that I had just sold a million-dollar home that I was not happy with. We build each of the homes as if we would have to live in them, so we'd better like our own product. To anyone new and looking for a house, I'd say that we know we are not cheap by any means, but our product speaks quality. We put in the extra effort, and we give you a higher standard," Masood says.

The family-owned company is very focused on building not only homes, but lasting relationships with both home buyers and its partners, and its commitment to the customer and the planet is reflected in its relationship-driven approach to business. Masood tells us that he enjoys working with some of

the same consultants he has known since he was first making his mark in the industry, 10 or 15 years ago. "We are trying to create lifelong customers," he says.

By applying great attention to detail in all of its projects, DiGreen purchases eco-friendly materials for its homes and also takes extra precautions not to disturb wildlife while constructing them. "There are only a handful of builders who acknowledge that development takes away from the environment. I need to chop down trees in order to build homes. But what am I doing about it that sets me apart? We try to build homes that are highly efficient," he adds. ▶

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► In a Caledon project, Masood even built a temporary, 10-foot bird mansion to accommodate a group of birds so they could enjoy the site before they migrated. Masood also mentions that one of DiGreen's sites in Markham had to be stopped because geese were nesting and he wanted to ensure the safety of the goslings. "I waited for the young ones to hatch and then began my work!" he shares.

Other DiGreen endeavours include keeping heritage homes as part of the development whenever possible, conserving natural features of the land, and creatively planting trees in a way that will accommodate as many of them as possible, in areas where they have a high chance of survival.

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“We try preserving as much as possible. Yes, I chop down trees, but at the same time I plant multiples of the number I took out. Wherever I can, or wherever my team suggests, I find a suitable place and plant a tree,” Masood says.

“Everything comes out of earth; we cannot ruin it. In Brampton, there is a creek that runs through the property where we are constructing homes, and we are working to conserve all of it. For the Swan Park development, I’m in talks with the Toronto and Region of Conservation Authority, and we are planning to give them as big of a buffer as we can so as not to ruin the wetlands and other features in that area,” he continues.

Swan Park is an upcoming development of limited release townhomes in the greenest part of Markham: near Oak Ridges Moraine (an ecologically and geologically significant landform in the Mixedwood Plains ecozone) and Rouge National Urban Park, which contains the Rouge River (Toronto’s healthiest river), wetlands, forests, and rare Carolinian ecosystems. The development is an ideal place to live for nature lovers.

Masood has no plans for DiGreen to compete alongside major production home builders, but he is just getting started in realizing his goals for the new builder on the block. DiGreen Square, which will feature prime retail and office space (and will likely be the future site of DiGreen’s corporate office), is a stepping stone into future commercial projects, and one day Masood would like to venture into high-rise construction as well.

After constructing single homes on 35, 40, and 45 foot single lots; townhomes on 15 to 25 foot lots; and semi-detached homes on lots in several Toronto-area suburbs, another future goal is to move closer into the City of Toronto. However, serving customers in Toronto itself entails offering high-rise residential options, as the city is primarily a condo market.

Masood is also considering ways to improve the DiGreen product, from an environmental as well as a quality standpoint. “By no means am I building a perfect product. There is always room for improvement,” he tells us.

In the future, DiGreen will continue to strive for greater environmental efficiency. Masood is currently exploring the possibility of offering solar panel installation as a new standard as the team considers what works and what doesn’t in terms of sustainability. Overall, the company is committed to doing things differently, and going above and beyond its customers’ expectations to provide them with a one-of-a-kind space they can be proud to call home. ■





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