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Elden v. Simmons: The Standard of Reasonableness Prevails--Implied Warranties of New Home Construction Do Not Necessarily Terminate on Resale in Oklahoma

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ELDEN v. SIMMONS: THE STANDARD OF REASONABLENESS PREVAILS—IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF NEW HOME CONSTRUCTION DO NOT "NECESSARILY" TERMINATE ON RESALE IN OKLAHOMA

I. Introduction

In July, 1981, the Oklahoma Supreme Court, in Elden v. Simmons, allowed the second purchaser of a home to sue the home's builder-vendor and the manufacturer of allegedly defective bricks used to construct the home. Calling the requirement of contractual privity in actions by plaintiffs without vertical privity an "antiquated notion," the court held that warranties of habitability and workmanlike construction implied in a home's first sale do not "necessarily" terminate on resale. The court ruled, instead, that the warranties are governed by a "standard of reasonableness," their duration to be determined by a jury.


2. Builder-vendor has been defined as follows:

[A] person who is in the business of building or assembling homes designed for dwelling purposes upon land owned by him, and who then sells the houses, either after they are completed or during the course of their construction, together with the tracts of land upon which they are situated, to members of the buying public. Jeanguneat v. Jackie Haines Coast. Co., 576 P.2d 761, 762 n.1 (Okla. 1978).

3. There are two types of nonprivity plaintiffs, vertical and horizontal. The vertical, nonprivity plaintiff is a buyer within the distributive chain who did not buy directly from the defendant. An example is a man or woman who buys a lathe from a local hardware store and later sues the manufacturer. The horizontal, nonprivity plaintiff, however, is not a buyer within the distributive chain but one who uses or consumes the goods, such as a woman poisoned by a bottle of beer purchased by her husband. The terms generally have been used in connection with § 2-318 of the Uniform Commercial Code, "Third Party Beneficiaries of Warranties Express or Implied." J. Witte & R. Summers, HANDBOOK ON THE UNIFORM COMMERCIAL CODE, §§ 11-1 to 11-7, (2d ed. 1980). As will be seen, the distinction was crucial to the case under discussion.

4. 631 P.2d at 742. The court noted that "given today's market structure . . . [a] manufactured product placed in the chain of distribution may literally pass through dozens of hands before it reaches the ultimate consumer," and that "it defies common sense to require such an endless chain of litigation" as would be produced by limiting the ultimate consumer of the product to redress only from his immediate seller, who would then sue his immediate seller, and so on. Id.

5. Id. at 742.

6. Id.

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With this decision Oklahoma joined a growing minority of jurisdictions chipping away at the doctrine of caveat emptor that traditionally has blocked implied warranty claims by purchasers of used homes. Several commentators have advocated such an extension for years. Other authors and other courts have warned against the potential danger of unlimited liability being placed on builders, of lulling consumers into complacently “looking to the courts for assistance where they should be exercising ordinary care in selecting their homes,” and of vagueness in decisions allowing the warranty extension.

In light of the facts of Elden, the court’s decision seems sound. However, the opinion, which is fewer than three pages long, is vague about the elements that will be necessary in the future to form a prima facie case under a claim of breach of implied warranty of habitability

7. Under common law the doctrine of caveat emptor applied to both real and personal property. It holds that, in the absence of fraud or misrepresentation, a vendor is responsible for the quality of the personal or real property that he is conveying only to the extent that he expressly agrees to responsibility. 7 S. WILLISTON, A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF CONTRACTS § 926 (3rd ed. 1963). For a discussion of the decline of the doctrine, see Bixby, Let the Seller Beware: Remedies for the Purchase of a Defective Home, 49 J. URBAN L. 535, 549 (1973):

The doctrine of caveat emptor, with its long history of protecting the seller of both real and personal property at the expense of the buyer, is near its end. The last bastion of this doctrine, the sale of second-hand real property, stands alone, while in all related areas the doctrine has recently suffered major setbacks. It seems only a matter of time until the last stronghold of this discredited doctrine will also fall, and purchasers of used homes will receive the protections denied them for so long.


12. The Case Against Strict Liability, supra note 10, at 106.

13. Barnes v. Mac Brown & Co., 264 Ind. 227, —, 342 N.E.2d 619, 622 (1976) (DeBruler, J., dissenting). Justice DeBruler charged that “the judicially created warranty of fitness for habitation is an ill-defined concept [which] should not be extended to cover[s]ubsequent purchases, which he termed] doubtful situations.” Id. The dissent wondered, also, at the type of defect to which the warranty would be applied, the time of accrual of the cause of action, and the difficulty in establishing damages if the warranty was extended. Id.
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or workmanlike construction.\textsuperscript{14} Issues left unresolved include: (1) The type of defect covered; (2) the standard of care to which a builder will be held; (3) the effect of disclaimers given to a first purchaser; (4) the failure of a subsequent purchaser to notify the builder of a possible breach (defect); (5) what classes of parties will be permitted to sue or be sued; and (6) the duration of the warranties and the applicable statute of limitations.\textsuperscript{15} The lack of clarity in these areas may exist because courts only recently have allowed such claims by subsequent purchasers, and the area is “being developed on a case by case basis.”\textsuperscript{16} The purpose of this Note is to examine other decisions which have been made in this area, as well as applicable existing Oklahoma law, in reference to the elements listed above. First, however, the facts and issues of Elden and the historical development in Oklahoma of implied warranties of construction and recovery by plaintiffs without privity will be reviewed.

II. Statement of the Case

A. Facts Alleged

The Eldens alleged that in April, 1976, they purchased a house from the Simmonses, who had bought the home from its builder, Harry

\textsuperscript{14} The elements necessary to establish a claim for breach of implied warranties in the sale of goods are set out in U.C.C. §§ 2-314 to 2-315 (and comments). See Okla. Stat. tit. 12A, §§ 2-314 to 2-315 (1976). However, no indication was given by the court in Elden, or any prior case, that standards established under the Code would apply to the area of subsequent purchases of real property.


The house, constructed in 1974, had exterior walls made of brick which had been supplied to Riggs by the manufacturer, Acme Brick Company. Soon after the Eldens took possession, the bricks began to split, splinter, and fall away from the house, leaving the house frame exposed in several places and necessitating complete replacement of the exterior walls. After receiving no relief from Riggs or Acme, the Eldens filed suit against the Simmonses, Riggs, and Acme, alleging breach of implied warranties of workmanlike construction, habitability, and reasonable fitness for intended use. The trial court sustained defendants' demurrers but allowed the Eldens to amend. The amended petition alleged negligence and breach of warranty and claimed a latent defect of which the Eldens had no knowledge when they purchased the home. Again, the trial court sustained defendants' demurrers. The court of appeals reversed, holding that the amended petition stated a cause of action as to Riggs and Acme, but not as to the Simmonses, the previous owners. Acme and Riggs sought certiorari, which was granted. The Eldens did not seek review of the appellate court decision on their suit against the Simmonses. Thus, the issue of whether a subsequent purchaser may bring a breach of implied warranty claim against his immediate seller who was not the builder-vendor of the home was not presented to the court.

B. Issues Presented to the Oklahoma Supreme Court

The court in *Elden v. Simmons* relied heavily on two previous opinions, *Jeanguneat v. Jackie Hames Construction Company* and *Old Albany Estates Ltd. v. Highland Carpet Mills, Inc.* In *Jeanguneat* the court extended an implied warranty of habitability and workmanlike construction to new homes. In *Old Albany Estates* the court held, with respect to goods, that a "manufacturer may be liable for breach of implied warranty of merchantability or fitness for [a] particular purpose" to a remote purchaser within the distributive chain of sale (i.e., a

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17. The facts pertaining to alleged damages to the Elden home are taken from Brief for Appellant at 3-4, Elden v. Simmons, 631 P.2d 739 (Okla. 1981).
18. Although the appellant's brief mentions no exact time when the brick deterioration began, the Eldens argued the deterioration started "immediately after" they moved into the home. *Id.* at 3. The Elden's filed suit on Dec. 16, 1977. *Id.* at 1.
20. 631 P.2d at 741.
23. 576 P.2d at 764.
The two basic issues in Elden were whether to extend the Jeanguneat and Old Albany Estates holdings to the fact situation presented in Elden. More specifically, whether the implied warranties established in Jeanguneat for a completed, newly built home terminate upon resale of the home, and, if not, whether the Old Albany Estates' holding as to vertical, nonprivity plaintiffs and the sale of goods would be extended to cover the sale of real property and, thus, the subsequent purchasers of such a home.

III. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF IMPLIED WARRANTIES IN HOME CONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY BY PLAINTIFFS WITHOUT PRIVITY

A. Development of Implied Warranties in Home Construction

There is nothing new about an implied warranty attaching to a contractor's work. As early as 1884 the United States Supreme Court recognized an implied warranty of reasonable suitability for intended use and applied it to a bridge construction situation, holding a contractor liable for latent defects.

In Oklahoma, too, implied warranties in straight construction contracts appear to have developed early. A 1924 case discussed the right of a landowner or proprietor to sue an independent contractor for breach of contract due to latent defects in the contractor's work. A 1931 case spoke of construction contracts containing an implied under-
taking to perform work in a proper and workmanlike manner. In 1954 the Oklahoma Supreme Court held a general contractor liable for breach of implied warranties in a contract to repair a homeowner’s driveway:

Where one engaged in the business of a general contractor, who by contract undertakes to perform work for another requiring the exercise of care, skill and knowledge, there is an implied warranty that the work which he undertakes shall be of proper workmanship and reasonable fitness for its intended use.

Significantly, in each of these cases the builder contracted with a landowner to do work on the landowner’s property. If a transaction involved transfer of title to real property, however, the doctrine of caveat emptor remained the rule. The application of caveat emptor arose from the ancient property doctrine of merger, which holds that the terms of a contract for the sale of real property merge with the deed, and the terms of the deed prevail. While implied warranties of construction on another person’s property were said to arise from the contract, the merger doctrine prevented recovery when a person bought a new home from the builder, even if warranties had been included in the contract for sale. The terms of the deed governed instead. Not until the mid-1950s did American courts begin to acknowledge the injustice resulting from this approach.

31. Id. at 343 (syllabus by the court).
32. See Jones v. Gatewood, 381 P.2d 158, 159 (Okla. 1963) (recognizing for the first time an implied warranty in a contract for sale of a home under construction at the time contract was signed). Little more than 10 years ago, a Georgia court used the caveat emptor rationale to deny implied warranty protection even to new homes. Amos v. McDonald, 123 Ga. App. 509, —, 181 S.E.2d 515, 517 (1971), overruled on other grounds, 159 Ga. App. 262, 282 S.E.2d 919 (1981).
34. Id.
35. The movement toward implied warranties of habitability began in the 1930s in England with the case of Miller v. Canon Hill Estates, Ltd., 2 K.B. 113 (1931), where the court found an implied warranty when the contract for sale of the home was signed before construction was substantially complete. The court’s rationale was that when a contract for sale is signed prior to completion of the home, the intent of the buyer—to have a house in which he can live—is known to the builder. The Miller rule was further explained in Perry v. Sharon Dev. Co., 4 All E.R. 390 (C.A. 1937), in that when a house is under construction when the contract for sale is signed, the buyer does not have an opportunity to inspect the premises before purchase. See generally Shedd, supra note 9, at 293-94; Williams, supra note 34, at 446-47.

As one author has noted:

After World War II . . . the building industry underwent a revolution. It became com-
The earliest American decisions finding implied warranties of habitability or workmanlike construction in home sales held that the warranty attached only if the home's sale contract had been signed before construction was substantially complete. In 1963 the Oklahoma Supreme Court, in *Jones v. Gatewood*, adopted the rule that, “in the absence of an agreement to the contrary,” the seller of an unfinished house impliedly warrants that the house “will be completed in a workmanlike manner and reasonably fit for occupancy as a place of abode.” The *Jones* decision did not discuss the merger doctrine; in fact, the court apparently has never directly addressed the issue of merger in the context of a warranty claim, beyond alluding to warranty in dictum in a later case as simply surviving delivery of the deed.

The year after *Jones* was decided, the Colorado Supreme Court, which previously had held that implied warranties attached only when the contract was signed prior to substantial completion, extended the warranty to contracts signed after completion. Once begun, the trend for the builder to sell the house and land together in a package deal. Indeed, the building industry outgrew the old notion that the builder was an artisan and took on all the color of a manufacturing enterprise, with acres of land being cleared by heavy machinery and prefabricated houses being put up almost overnight. Having learned their law by rote, however, the lawyers tended to insist that *caveat emptor* nonetheless applied to these sales.


38. *Id* at 158 (syllabus by the court). In *Jones* plaintiffs alleged breach of warranty for damages caused by water seepage into the floor coverings of their home within months after they took possession. At trial expert testimony indicated the damage was caused by either a failure to provide a waterproof membrane between the concrete slab foundation and the house or a puncture in the membrane, if one had been provided. *Id* at 159.


*That a different rule should apply to the purchaser of a house which is near completion than would apply to one who purchases a new house seems incongruous. To say that the former may rely on an implied warranty and the latter cannot is recognizing a distinction without a reasonable basis.*
toward extension of implied warranties to completed homes initiated by the Colorado court continued steadily into the 1970s. The reasons for extension were numerous and variously stated, but the basic idea of each involved a builder's greater expertise and a buyer's reliance on that expertise. Practical considerations included the difficulty and expense a buyer necessarily would encounter in launching a full-fledged inspection of a home or in changing the terms of standard contracts used by the building industry.

Apparently, the opportunity for the Oklahoma Supreme Court to approve implied warranties for newly completed homes did not arise until 1978. In *Jeanguneat* the court considered the large number of other states which had opted for warranty protection for purchasers of new homes and decided, simply, that there was "no reasonable basis" for limiting implied warranties to unfinished homes. The doctrine of caveat emptor, the court noted, did a disservice to both purchasers and the housing industry by allowing unethical builders to get by with shoddy work. However, the *Jeanguneat* decision did not require the builder to build a perfect home; it imposed only a "standard of reasonableness" as to construction and the duration of warranties of work-

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42. A table of all jurisdictions rejecting or extending implied warranties of habitability and workmanlike construction, as of May 1981, is available from the National Association of Home Builders' State, Local and Environmental Affairs Division in Washington, D.C. The chart also shows states which have extended warranties to subsequent purchasers.

43. See, e.g., Wawak v. Stewart, 247 Ark. 1093, 449 S.W.2d 922 (1970) (contrast between implied warranty rules as to personal property and caveat emptor to real estate called indefensible); Bethlahmy v. Bechtel, 91 Idaho 55, 415 P.2d 698 (1966) (home purchase often the most important transaction of a lifetime).

44. See, e.g., Rutledge v. Dodenhoff, 254 S.C. 407, —, 175 S.E.2d 792, 795 (1970) (extending warranty to new homes). The court stated:

> [T]he primary purpose of the transaction is to provide the purchaser with a habitable dwelling and the transfer of land is secondary. The seller holds himself out as an expert in such construction, and the prospective purchaser, if he buys, is forced to a large extent to rely on the skill of the builder . . . . [T]he ordinary purchaser is precluded from making a knowledgeable inspection of the completed house not only because of expense and his unfamiliarity with building construction, but also because the defects are usually hidden rendering inspection practically impossible.


46. 576 P.2d at 763.

47. The *Jeanguneat* court also held that the warranty extended to a water well which the builder-vendor had installed for the home, and which, due to either a defect in the well or improper installation, caused the home's water to be unsuitable for human consumption. The court emphatically stated, however, that its ruling did not decide whether a builder-vendor guaranteed the quality of a home's water, provided the builder vendor had not ruined the quality himself. *Id.* at 785.

48. *Id.* at 763 (citing Humber v. Morton, 426 S.W.2d 554 (Tex. 1968)).
manlike construction and habitability.\textsuperscript{49}

The \textit{Jeanguneat} decision, while filling some gaps left by the \textit{Jones} decision, obscured other areas that had appeared definitive after \textit{Jones}. For example, \textit{Jones} had not addressed questions regarding the duration of the warranties, the standard of construction to which builders would be held, or the applicable statute of limitations. On the other hand, it was clear that the \textit{Jones} rule was intended to apply to defects that were "latent and undiscoverable by reasonable inspection\textsuperscript{50}" of the premises, and that the implied warranty could be waived.\textsuperscript{51} The \textit{Jeanguneat} opinion answered the questions concerning duration of the warranties and the standard of construction to which builders would be held: The standard of reasonableness would prevail.\textsuperscript{52} The decision also reinforced the idea that the warranties could be waived.\textsuperscript{53} As to the type of defect which would be covered, however, \textit{Jeanguneat} obscured the issue by not explicitly specifying latent and undiscoverable defects.\textsuperscript{54} The court also changed terminology as to what warranty would be implied. The \textit{Jones} warranty of reasonable fitness for occupancy as a place of abode became, in \textit{Jeanguneat}, the warranty of habitability. There may be no difference in the meaning of the terms, but the court did not define either one. Finally, neither \textit{Jones} nor \textit{Jeanguneat} discussed the applicable statute of limitations. Despite the \textit{Elden} decision, several of these areas remain obscure today.

B. Development of Recovery by Plaintiffs Without Privity

As seen in the previous section, the Oklahoma Supreme Court established in \textit{Jeanguneat} that implied warranties of habitability and workmanlike construction would last for a reasonable time. This statement was made without limitation as to ownership of the property. In effect, the court appeared to be saying that the warranties attached to the structure itself. This view is substantiated in \textit{Elden}, which held that the warranties do not necessarily terminate on resale of the home. However, the presence of the warranties would not have benefited the Eldens if the traditional requirement of contractual privity remained to

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Id.} at 764.
\textsuperscript{50} 381 P.2d at 159.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Id.} at 158 (syllabus by the court) (holding includes the phrase, "in the absence of an agreement to the contrary").
\textsuperscript{52} 576 P.2d at 764.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Id.} ("in the absence of an agreement to the contrary").
\textsuperscript{54} See \textit{Id.} at 764. The court does not mention the type of defect covered or refer to the \textit{Jones} decision on this point. \textit{Id.} at 763.
prohibit a suit against the alleged warrantors—the home's builder-vendor and the manufacturer of material used to construct the home.

There appear to be four bases of liability upon which plaintiffs without privity have been permitted to recover in Oklahoma for defective goods: Negligence,\textsuperscript{55} implied warranty in tort,\textsuperscript{56} strict tort liability (manufacturers' products liability),\textsuperscript{57} and extension of implied warranties in contracts.\textsuperscript{58} The negligence and implied contractual warranty theories have been extended to the home construction area, permitting suits by plaintiffs without privity against the builder-vendor of a home.\textsuperscript{59} Because the implied warranty in tort theory was merged with the newly adopted tort theory of manufacturers' products liability\textsuperscript{60} and no longer appears to be applicable to new home construction, the

55. See infra notes 67-81 and accompanying text.
56. The implied warranty in tort theory has done much to confuse the concept of implied warranty. Although warranty, in its infancy, was based on tort liability, "it has become so identified in practice with a contract of sale between the plaintiff and the defendant that the warranty theory has become something of an obstacle to the recognition of the strict liability where there is no such contract." Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 402A, Comment m. (1965). A predecessor to strict tort liability, the doctrine generally has been said to be founded in Henningsen v. Bloomingfield Motors, Inc., 32 N.J. 358, 161 A.2d 69 (1960), where the court imposed an implied warranty of safety on a newly purchased automobile to allow the wife of the purchaser to recover for injuries she received due to a defect in the car. The Henningsen court said the warranty grew out of contract law, but later applications by other courts led to problems for consumers due to contractual defenses, such as disclaimers and notice. Because of these problems, many jurisdictions made exceptions for consumers in commercial transactions. Then, recognizing the tortious nature the action was assuming, jurisdictions began to drop the "implied warranty" cause of action in such situations and use, instead, the doctrine of strict liability in tort. See W. Prosser, Handbook of the Law of Torts, §§ 95, 97 (4th ed. 1979). Oklahoma's flirtation with the doctrine began in 1965 with Marathon Battery Co. v. Kilpatrick, 418 P.2d 900 (Okla. 1965), when a purchaser of a defective battery which exploded was permitted to recover on a warranty from the manufacturer. The court, explicitly denying that it was considering any questions of privity, \textit{id.} at 911, determined that implied warranty liability was established as soon as the plaintiff proved the product had left the manufacturer's possession in a defective condition, and that as a result of the defect the plaintiff was injured. \textit{Id.} at 902 (syllabus by the court). Nine years later, in Kirkland v. Gen. Motors Corp., 521 P.2d 1353 (Okla. 1974), the Oklahoma Supreme Court abolished the Marathon Battery rule, opting instead for strict products liability, which the court elected to call "Manufacturers' Products Liability." \textit{Id.} at 1361. The court stated: "The theory of implied warranty recovery for injuries to persons heretofore existing in this jurisdiction is merged into the theory and doctrine of manufacturers' products liability, and except for Uniform Commercial Code application, is no longer viable." \textit{Id.} at 1355 (syllabus by the court). However, some courts continued to use the term "implied warranty," but considered it a tort cause of action in certain third-party situations. See, e.g., Neofes v. Robertshaw Controls Co., 409 F. Supp. 1376-79 (S.D. Ind. 1976); Humber v. Morton, 426 S.W.2d 554, 557 (1968); Builders' Liability for Latent Defects in Used Homes, supra note 9, at 614. The doctrine of strict tort liability for defective products is embodied in section 402A of the Restatement (Second) of Torts (1965).
57. See supra note 56 and infra note 60.
58. See infra notes 79-86 and accompanying text.
59. Elden v. Simmons marks the extension of the latter theory.
60. Kirkland v. Gen. Motors Corp., 521 P.2d 1353 (Okla. 1974). As one commentator has noted, "The application of strict tort liability to the real estate context is based on the analogy to
discussion will focus on negligence and implied contractual warranty.\textsuperscript{61}

1. Negligence

Building contractors' liability to plaintiffs without privity "has
tended to follow the same general path of development as that of sup-
pliers of chattels, but to lag behind it by some twenty years."\textsuperscript{62} Development in Oklahoma of a negligence cause of action by plaintiffs without privity against the builder of a defective home bears out this observation. The first Oklahoma Supreme Court decision dealing with a contractor's liability to third persons was \textit{Armstrong v. City of Tulsa},\textsuperscript{63} which set forth the general rule of liability: In the absence of a willful or intentional wrong, after a contractor has completed his work and it has been accepted by the proprietor of the property, the contractor "incurs no further liability to third persons by reason of the condition of the work, but the responsibility . . . for maintaining or using it in its defective condition is shifted to the proprietor."\textsuperscript{64} Ten years later, in \textit{Crane Company v. Sears},\textsuperscript{65} the court adopted the doctrine established in 1916 in the New York case of \textit{MacPherson v. Buick Motor Company}\textsuperscript{66} as to defective chattels.\textsuperscript{67} In 1958, twenty-four years after
Crane, the court in Greenwood v. Lyles & Buckner,\textsuperscript{68} while not citing directly to MacPherson, recognized a similar doctrine in relation to a contractor's work on the state highway system:

Where the contractor has willfully created a condition which he knows to be immediately and certainly dangerous to persons other than the contractee, who will necessarily be exposed to such danger, considerations of public policy do not require the application of the general rule [of non-liability to persons other than the contractee].\textsuperscript{69}

In 1961 the court officially applied the MacPherson doctrine to defective construction and, in Leigh v. Wadsworth,\textsuperscript{70} allowed the tenant of a second purchaser to recover from the builder for personal injuries the tenant received when the front porch roof of the home collapsed on her. The decision acknowledged the general rule of a contractor's non-liability to third persons after his work had been accepted, but noted the Greenwood exception.\textsuperscript{71} In response to the defendant builder's claim that he was exempt from liability because he did not actually know of the danger, and because the accident had occurred several years after he built the porch, the court defined "knowledge" and "immediately dangerous," stating:

The contractor's negligence . . . has been characterized as "willful negligence". . . . [I]f the facts show that defendant knew or by the exercise of ordinary diligence should have known that the porch as built was "immediately and certainly dangerous" he was guilty of willful negligence.

. . .

[T]he meaning intended [by the word "immediately"] was that where the defect created by a contractor is the imme-

\textsuperscript{67} The Crane court stated:

Where a manufacturer with information before him of the nature of the use to which an article manufactured by him is to be put and from the nature of such use must know that if the article when put to such use, is defective, will be imminently dangerous to persons who he knows must come in contact therewith, a duty rests upon such manufacturer to use ordinary care to ascertain the condition of the article to see that it is safe. If he fails to exercise ordinary care in this regard, and as a result sells the article in a defective condition, he is liable for personal injuries to that class of persons who must necessarily come in contact with such article, and liability is not limited to those with whom the manufacturer contracts.

\textsuperscript{68} Okla. at 603, 35 P.2d at 917 (syllabus by the court).

\textsuperscript{69} Id. at 1063 (syllabus by the court).

\textsuperscript{70} 361 P.2d 849 (Okla. 1961).

\textsuperscript{71} Id. at 850-51, 853-54.
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Immediate and proximate cause of the injury—immediate and proximate because there is no intervening cause that may have brought about or directly contributed to the injury, the contractor may . . . be held liable.\textsuperscript{72}

In other words, a builder is liable to persons other than his contractee if he willfully creates a condition which he knows or should know will endanger such persons, and the condition is, in fact, the proximate cause of the injury. The \textit{Leigh} court also asserted that the rule applied when property damage was caused by the builder's negligence in a similar situation.\textsuperscript{73}

Although the rationale used in both \textit{Leigh} and \textit{Greenwood} has been reinforced in three later cases as the current rule governing builders' liability in negligence to persons without privity,\textsuperscript{74} the rule has been applied by the court in only one other case in which plaintiffs without privity sought recovery from a contractor who did work on their home. In \textit{Lowe v. Francis Construction Co.},\textsuperscript{75} the Oklahoma Supreme Court allowed the owners of a home to bring a negligence action against a subcontractor who negligently installed a gas line that leaked, causing an explosion. Although the court allowed the plaintiffs to sue, it acknowledged the general rule of nonliability after the work is accepted.\textsuperscript{76}

It appears unlikely that the Eldens could have recovered under a negligence claim against their builder-vendor, primarily due to the requirement of proof that the builder-vendor's "willful negligence" was the proximate cause of their home's deteriorating bricks, and that such deterioration was foreseeable. Another potential barrier to a negligence claim is the uncertain meaning of "property damage."\textsuperscript{77} The

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Id} at 853-54.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Id} at 852-53.
\textsuperscript{74} Minor v. Zidell Trust, 618 P.2d 392, 393 n.1 (Okla. 1980); Lowe v. Francis Const. Co., 373 P.2d 51, 54 (Okla. 1962); Schlender v. Andy Jansen Co., 380 P.2d 523, 524 (Okla. 1962) (syllabus by the court). In note 1 the court recognized \textit{Leigh}, \textit{Greenwood}, and \textit{Schlender} as establishing the liability of a builder. The issue of a builder's liability, however, was not an issue before the court.
\textsuperscript{75} 373 P.2d 51 (Okla. 1962).
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Id} at 54.
\textsuperscript{77} J. White & R. Summers, \textit{ supra} note 3, \S 11-4:

In this discussion we use the terms "property damage" on the one hand and "economic loss" on the other to describe different kinds of damages a plaintiff may suffer. An action brought to recover damages for inadequate value, costs of repair, and replacement of defective goods or consequent loss of profits is one for "economic loss." Property damage, on the other hand, is the \textit{Restatement's} (of Torts) "physical harm . . . to [user's] property" . . . . Of course, borderline cases can arise that do not fit comfortably in either the property damage or the economic loss category. Consider a car that throws a rod after a thousand miles of normal use. Is the loss property damage because the injury
damage in *Leigh* and *Lowe* involved personal injury or the nearly total destruction of a house. By comparison, the damage in *Elden* resembles mere pecuniary loss, or a loss on the bargain. In addition, the damage in *Elden* occurred gradually over a period of time, while in *Leigh* and *Lowe*, the damage was sudden and devastating. The direct question of whether a plaintiff without privity may recover on a negligence theory for mere pecuniary loss, unaccompanied by personal injury or major property damage, remains unaddressed by the Oklahoma court. 78

2. Extension of Implied Contractual Warranties In The Sale of Goods

The *Elden* decision marked the extension of an implied warranty to allow a breach of warranty suit by the subsequent purchaser of a new home. Prior to *Elden* similar extensions had occurred only in the sale of defective personal property. Oklahoma has taken a two-pronged approach in the area, with one branch developing for nonprivity, horizontal, or third party plaintiffs under section 2-318 of the Oklahoma Commercial Code. 79 The other branch developed for verti-

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Id. The authors were discussing types of nonprivity recovery under a contractual warranty theory, but the distinction seems valid for negligence, also. A court might hesitate to impose negligence liability if the harm suffered appeared contractual in nature, such as a loss on the bargain, or lost profits. But see OKLA. STAT. tit. 12, § 109(i) (Supp. 1980). The section provides for limitations on tort actions arising out of construction work, including actions “for any deficiency in the design, planning, supervision or observation of construction or construction of an improvement to real property.” Id. There are no reported cases dealing with this section's implications for recovery on a negligence theory for damage resembling contractual loss, however.

78. Decisions which have permitted recovery by subsequent purchasers on a negligence theory include Coburn v. Lennox Homes, Inc., 173 Conn. 567, — , 378 A.2d 599, 603 (1977) (second purchaser allowed to recover for a foreseeable injury from a defective septic system); Simmons v. Owens, 363 So.2d 142, 143 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1978) (subsequent purchasers permitted to recover on negligence theory for damages caused by water rot and termite infestation resulting from builder-vendor's failure to comply with building code in house structure); Brown v. Fowler, 279 N.W.2d 907, 910 (S.D. 1979) (subsequent purchasers permitted to sue builder-vendor on negligence theory for damages resulting from settling of basement of their homes, but not on implied warranty theory due to lack of privity).

79. OKLA. STAT. tit. 12A, § 2-318 (1971). The section deals with third party beneficiaries of warranties, express or implied. Oklahoma's chosen version of the Uniform Commercial Code's three alternatives is as follows:

A seller's warranty, whether express or implied extends to any natural person who is in the family or household of his buyer or who is a guest in his home if it is reasonable to expect that such person may use, consume or be affected by the goods and who is injured in person by breach of the warranty. A seller may not exclude or limit the operation of this section.

The section appears to take no position on the rights of vertical, nonprivity plaintiffs. J. White & R. Summers, supra note 3, § 1-12. U.C.C. § 2-318, Official Comment 3 states:

The first alternative expressly includes as beneficiaries within its provisions the family,
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Both methods are explained in *Old Albany Estates*, on which the *Elden* court relied in justifying the implied warranty action by home purchasers without privity. In *Old Albany Estates* the defendant argued that Old Albany could not recover because it lacked the requisite privity of contract and could not qualify as a third party beneficiary of a warranty under Code section 2-318 because the section covers only "natural persons" in the family or household of the buyer, or guests whose use or consumption of the product is foreseeable. The court, however, relying on its rationale in a 1979 case, determined that Old Albany was entitled to recovery:

Section 2-318 comes into play only after a final sale has been made and reflects the Legislature's intent to limit warranties applicable to parties with no contractual relationship to any person within the distributive chain of ownership through purchase. It has no application to plaintiff here who was the ultimate purchaser of the carpet and in the "vertical" chain of distribution.

Because of section 2-318's silence on the subject, recovery by

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80. For a definition of vertical and horizontal, nonprivity plaintiffs see supra note 3.
81. See 604 P.2d at 851 (U.C.C. does not apply to vertical, nonprivity plaintiffs).
82. Id. at 851-52. The plaintiff, Old Albany Estates, purchased carpet for an apartment complex from the defendant carpet company. After the carpet was installed, it became discolored and lost fiber. Highland, believing it had disclaimed all warranties by means of a disclaimer written on an invoice sent with the first shipment of carpet, refused to adjust the carpet's price. Old Albany sued for breach of implied warranties of fitness and merchantability. The court referred to the UCC, 12A, § 2-207 (1971), concerning additional or conflicting terms, however, the court found the disclaimers were a material alteration of the contract, and thus invalid. 604 P.2d at 853.
83. Barker v. Allied Supermarkets, 596 P.2d 870 (Okla. 1979) (holding a warranty of merchantability as to packaged food products extended directly from the bottler to the buyer at a retail market, despite lack of privity by plaintiff).
plaintiffs without privity but in the direct chain of distribution is being
developed by case law. The *Old Albany Estates* decision indicates that
as long as a plaintiff is in the distributive chain, he may maintain a
direct action against the manufacturer if the goods are defective, even if
the damage is contractual in nature. The desired result of this ap-
proach is to avoid a "needless chain of actions whereby each buyer
must seek redress from his immediate seller until the actual manufac-
turer is eventually reached."86

Two years after *Old Albany Estates*, in *Elden v. Simmons*, the court
combined its *Old Albany Estates* holding—that a manufacturer may be
liable for breach of implied warranties without regard to privity of con-
tract with a remote purchaser—with its holding in *Jeanguneat*—that
implied warranties of reasonable duration attach to new home con-
struction—and allowed the subsequent purchasers of an allegedly de-
fective home to sue the remote seller and the manufacturer of bricks
used to construct their home.87

86. *Id.* at 851-52.

87. All of the remedies for subsequent purchasers discussed in the text are judicially created.
However, there are a number of other warranty programs, created by the building industry or by
state legislatures, which give express provisions as to the extent of coverage, and the conciliation
procedures between builder and home purchaser. Probably the most well known of the private
warranty programs is the Home Owners Warranty Corp. (HOW). HOW was formed in the early
1970s by the National Association of Home Builders to improve the image of builders, avoid
government interference in the building industry, and provide a means for dispute settlement.
The program has established local HOW councils throughout the country, offering local builders
who can meet HOW's building standards the opportunity to offer their purchasers HOW protec-
tion.

The program offers a 10-year warranty, backed by insurance, to cover major structural de-
fects in new homes. During the first year after sale the builder promises to repair, replace, or pay
for repair or replacement of faulty workmanship and defective materials, including defects in
plastering, wall tiling, flooring drains, and "wet rot" on window frames, doors, and other
millwork. The builder also warrants against defects in plumbing, heating, electrical and cooling
systems, and is responsible for major structural defects, which are defined in HOW's "Approved
Standards" booklet (No. 25, March 1980) as actual damage to the "load bearing portion of the
home that affects its load bearing function and . . . vitally affect[s] or [is] imminently likely to
produce a vital effect on the use of the home for residential purposes." During the second year,
the builder is responsible for major structural defects and defects in the electrical, plumbing, and
heating and cooling systems. During the third through tenth year of coverage, HOW's insur-
ance—not the builder—warrants against major structural defects. The program's insurance un-
derwriter also underwrites the builder, so that if he does not make the required repairs during the
first two years, the insurance covers the costs. HOW also provides for conciliation and arbitration
in the event of a builder-homebuyer dispute, but if the homebuyer chooses not to accept the
decision in arbitration, he retains the right to sue.

Although HOW coverage is available in Oklahoma, a recent rift between HOW and Tulsa
builders over the high number of foundation defect claims in the Tulsa area triggered the creation
of the "New Home Warranty" program (NHW) by the Builders Association of Metropolitan
Tulsa. As of April, 1982, the operation of the program appears to be temporarily suspended due
to lagging construction activity. However, NHW offers five-year protection, backed by a perform-
ance bond. During the first year, the builder warrants against major structural defects and defects
Although the Eldens alleged negligence by Acme in producing the bricks used to construct their home, their entire argument urged the court to apply an implied warranty. Defendant Riggs, the builder-vendor, argued that implied warranties terminate upon resale by the first owner, and that because he had not been accused of negligence, his demurrer should be upheld. Defendant Acme argued that the Eldens had not supported their allegation of negligence, and that the accusation should be dropped. In addition, Acme contended that implied warranties did not extend to subsequent purchasers, and that because the Eldens were not within a class covered by Oklahoma Commercial Code section 2-318, they were not entitled to recover. The court apparently agreed as to negligence, for the theory is not discussed in the opinion.

Dealing first with the builder-vendor's liability, the court noted
that its decision in *Jeanguneat* had specifically established that warranties of workmanlike construction and reasonable fitness "for occupancy as a place of abode" existed, as a matter of law, for a reasonable time. Then, referring to its holding in *Old Albany Estates* permitting suits by remote purchasers against manufacturers for breach of warranties of fitness and merchantability, the court said it could find no reason not to allow such suits for breach of warranties of workmanlike construction and habitability. Just as the carpet company manufactured the allegedly defective carpet, Riggs might be considered the manufacturer of the home. The same rationale was applied to the liability of Acme, whose position was analogized to that of the manufacturer of component parts used in the manufacturing process. The only other rationale stated explicitly by the court was its purpose to avoid a long line of lawsuits reaching back to the one ultimately responsible for the defect.

Furthermore, the court decided that the question of whether the warranties were still in effect at the "time of the alleged breach" was a factual question for the jury. Finally, the applicable statute of limitations allowed an action for breach for five years "after the cause of action shall have accrued" because the claim was on a written contract for the sale of a home, and the warranties were implicitly part of that contract.

**V. Analysis**

Equitably speaking, the *Elden* decision seems sound. As continually reiterated in cases applying implied warranties to new homes, the mere transfer of title does, indeed, seem a capricious and arbitrary termination point for the standard of reasonable care. The warranty attaches to the home, not the owner, and as the *Elden* court indicated, ownership should not be controlling. If the bricks were inherently defective or fell apart due to unworkmanlike methods of construction, and the Eldens had no reasonable means of discovering the defect prior to purchase, it would be patently unfair to deny them redress. As Professor Haskell noted in 1965 when he urged the extension of implied warranty to home sales:

89. 631 P.2d at 741.
90. *Id.*
91. *Id.*
92. *Id.* at 741. The court applied OKLA. STAT. tit. 12, § 95(1) (1971).
93. 631 P.2d at 742 n.1.
94. *Id.* at 742.
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The law has evolved to the incongruous state where it offers greater protection to the purchaser of a seventy-nine cent dog leash than it does to the purchaser of a $40,000 home. If the dog leash is defective, the purchaser can get his money back and he may be able to recover damages if he loses his dog because of the defective leash. If the purchaser of a house is required to replace the heating unit two months after the purchase, he probably has no recourse against the seller; quality is generally at the risk of the buyer of real property, absent an express warranty or fraud.95

Although the comment originally was meant to apply to first purchasers, it might well apply to subsequent purchasers in most states today; only a handful of jurisdictions have extended implied warranty protection beyond first purchasers.96

Practically speaking, however, the Elden decision leaves much to be desired. First, as noted earlier, neither Elden nor its two predecessors, Jones and Jeanguneat, expressly states an exception to the property doctrine of merger. The Elden decision states that the warranties are implied in the written contract for sale, but it does not explain how they survived transfer of title. Secondly, the court is inconsistent in its use of terms: In Jones the builder-vendor warranted the home to be "reasonably fit for occupancy as a place of abode;" in Jeanguneat the term "habitability" was introduced. In Elden the court said it had imposed a warranty of reasonable fitness for occupancy as a place of abode in Jeanguneat, but again shifted to the term "habitability." Apparently, the court intends for the terms to be used interchangeably; the court should clarify its position and define the terms.

However, the major problems with the Elden decision stem from the implication that there is "no reason" not to extend the ability to sue to subsequent purchasers. There have been numerous reasons stated by courts and commentators97 for not extending warranties to both

96. See supra note 8.
97. E.g., Wawak v. Stewart, 247 Ark. 1093, 449 S.W.2d 922, 931 (1970) (dissenting and concurring opinion) (imposition of liability on builder to first purchaser of new home should be left to legislature; merely because caveat emptor doctrine is timeworn does not necessarily mean it is obsolete); Barnes v. Mac Brown & Co., 264 Ind. 227, 342 N.E.2d 619 (1976) (dissenting opinion) (extension to second purchaser violates principle of bargain and sale; determination of damages would be difficult because defendant builder did not participate in bargaining between plaintiff and his immediate seller); Oliver v. City Builders, Inc., 303 So. 2d 466 (Miss. 1974) (potential problems which could develop if first purchaser accepted "as is" but subsequent purchaser did not; general policy of protecting freedom of contract, since buyer can always insist on certain
subsequent and first purchasers. Perhaps the most basic, however, was exposed in the majority and dissenting opinions of the Arkansas decision extending implied warranties to new homes, \textit{Wawak v. Stewart}.\footnote{247 Ark. 1093, 449 S.W.2d 922 (1970) (two justices dissenting and concurring; one justice dissenting).} Justice Fogelman, joined by Chief Justice Harris in a concurring and dissenting opinion, suggested that perhaps the court was imprudent in imposing the warranties without legislative guidelines defining the extent and application of such warranties.\footnote{Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 932.} Justice Byrd, dissenting, noted that warranties governing personal property are guided by the Uniform Sales Act and Uniform Commercial Code, which were earnestly considered prior to enactment.\footnote{Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 932-33.} The majority, however, believed that a "judicial decision may focus legislative attention upon the problems" of the building industry.\footnote{Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 926.} Likening its decision to the landmark \textit{MacPherson} doctrine, the majority noted that the argument against courts attempting to legislate undoubtedly was made against the New York court's holding, but "the doctrine of the \textit{MacPherson} case is now accepted as commonplace throughout the nation."\footnote{Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 925.}

The debate is a "chicken-and-egg" argument, but it was not even broached by the \textit{Elden} court. Is there, indeed, no reason not to extend warranty protection to subsequent homebuyers just as they were extended to non-privity purchasers of goods? Sales of goods are governed by the Commercial Code. What guidelines will govern those of home sales? At the same time, however, should purchasers of defective property be forced to wait until legislators decide to buck the building industry and impose mandatory protection against poor construction? Unfortunately, these questions were not resolved in \textit{Elden}. Too many important areas remain vague: Which types of defects are actionable, how disclaimers in the first sale of a home affect subsequent purchasers, whether a subsequent purchaser must give the builder-vendor a chance to remedy a defect before bringing suit, parties to whom implied war-

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\footnote{98. 247 Ark. 1093, 449 S.W.2d 922 (1970) (two justices dissenting and concurring; one justice dissenting).\footnote{99. Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 932.\footnote{100. Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 932-33.\footnote{101. Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 926.\footnote{102. Id. at \textemdash, 449 S.W.2d at 925.}}}}

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http://digitalcommons.law.utulsa.edu/tlr/vol17/iss4/5
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ranty actions are available, and when a cause of action for breach of warranty accrues.

A. Type of Defect to Which Warranty Applies and Applicable Standard of Care in Construction

Of the five reported cases which have allowed subsequent purchasers to sue their home's builder-vendor, only one—Elden v. Simmons—does not explicitly say, even in general terms, what kinds of defects are actionable. The other cases, as well as many decisions which have not extended warranty protection beyond first purchasers, hold builder-vendors liable only for latent defects not discoverable through reasonable inspection and not discovered until after purchase. Neither Elden nor Jeanguneat expressly states this limitation, but it does appear in Jones as part of the plaintiff's allegations. Because both Elden and Jeanguneat are based on Jones, and because the Eldens also alleged a latent defect in their complaint, it appears probable that only latent defects are actionable in Oklahoma under a theory of implied warranty.

Various private or statutorily imposed warranty programs have used a different approach, classifying defects by type and applying different express lengths of time during which a purchaser may recover. Depending upon the program or statute, however, these warranties seem almost as variable as the types of defects imaginable: Some give coverage for only a year, while one will extend coverage for up to ten years for a major construction defect. Asking the judicial system to


104. 381 P.2d at 159.

105. Brief of Appellant, at 4; see supra note 18.

106. See warranty programs, regulations and statutes supra note 87.

107. See CONN. GEN. STAT. §§ 47-116 to -120 (1978) (warranties express and implied terminate one year after delivery of deed to purchaser or one year after purchaser takes possession, whichever occurs first. If not complete at time of deed delivery, warranty extends for one year
delineate defects as the warranty programs have would be unrealistic. Retaining the requirement that defects be latent, however, places enough restriction on the builder to keep him alert to potential problems, but not constantly on guard against irresponsible purchasers who failed to perform a reasonable inspection of their home before purchase. There is need to protect against shoddy construction work, but given the high price of houses today, prospective purchasers should be responsible enough to see what they may, or may not, be getting for their money.

A related problem is whether defects in renovation or repair work on a home are actionable on an implied warranty theory by remote or immediate purchasers where the work was performed by a professional builder or contracted for by a professional vendor of such property. There appears to be no Oklahoma case on point. Cox v. Curnutt\(^{108}\) allowed an implied warranty action against a general contractor for unworkmanlike performance by his subcontractor in repairing plaintiff's driveway. However, plaintiffs were barred from suing the subcontractor because they lacked contractual privity with him.\(^{109}\) In Lowe v. Francis Construction Co.\(^{110}\) the plaintiffs were permitted to sue a subcontractor with whom they lacked privity on a negligence theory where the damage to plaintiffs' home as a result of the alleged negligence was devastating and tortious in nature.\(^{111}\) Although Elden, while dispensing with the privity requirement, appears to apply only to suits between a builder-vendor and the subsequent purchaser of a new, completed home, there is no reason why a similar rationale could not be applied to any professional builder or vendor who makes additions or improvements to an older home. The Uniform Land Transactions Act\(^{112}\) provides for such warranties, as does a statutorily imposed warranty...

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\(^{109}\) 271 P.2d at 344.

\(^{110}\) 361 P.2d 849 (Okla. 1961). See supra notes 70-77 and accompanying text.

\(^{111}\) 361 P.2d at 850.

\(^{112}\) Uniform Land Transactions Act § 2-309(b) (1975):

A seller, other than a lessor, in the business of selling real estate impliedly warrants that the real estate is suitable for the ordinary uses of real estate of its type and that any improvements made or contracted for by him and completed no earlier than two years before the date the contract to convey is made will be: (1) free from defective materials; and (2) constructed in accordance with applicable law, according to sound engineering and construction standards, and in a workmanlike manner. Section 2-312(b) of the act provides that all warranties of quality are conveyed with transfer of title.
program in Minnesota. Additionally, the Old Albany Estates holding as to suits against manufacturers by vertical, nonprivity plaintiffs might be used to support recovery for goods, installed by a repairman, which later turned out to be defective.

B. Disclaimers and the Requirement of Notice of Defects to a Builder-Vendor

Although Oklahoma law recognizes the validity of implied warranty disclaimers in the sale of goods, Elden did not directly address express disclaimers of implied warranties of construction quality. However, Jones and Jeanguneat each included the phrase, "in the absence of an agreement to the contrary," in their holdings. Thus, it appears that implied warranties of construction can be disclaimed or modified in a home's original contract for sale. Problems could arise, however, if a subsequent purchaser is not aware of disclaimers in the first sale of the home. In a 1980 case the Oklahoma Supreme Court faced a situation analogous to one in which the first purchaser of a home takes the property with expressly limited warranty coverage, but a second purchaser does not. In Perry v. Lawson Ford Tractor Co., the purchaser of a used combine sued the manufacturer and dealer for fraud, misrepresentation, and breach of warranty due to defects in the tractor. The dealer claimed that a booklet containing express disclaimers of all implied warranties had been placed inside the combine. The purchaser claimed the booklet had several pages torn out, apparently including those containing the disclaimers. Plaintiff recovered at trial, but the Supreme Court reversed and remanded because the trial judge failed to instruct the jury that if they found the plaintiff was aware of the warranty disclaimers, the disclaimers would be valid. If the plaintiff was not aware of the disclaimers, however, they would be invalid due to the requirement of an express agreement to exclude or modify implied warranties. Basing the validity of disclaimers on the reasonable awareness of the plaintiff appears to be a model answer for the problem of disclaimers and subsequent purchasers of homes. A subsequent purchaser might not have access to his immediate seller's con-

113. See MINN. STAT. ANN. § 327A.01(11) (1981) ("owner" defined as "any person who owns residential building on which home improvement work is performed, and includes any subsequent owner ... of the building"); MINN. STAT. ANN. § 327A.02(3) (1981) (providing for implied statutory warranties of quality in a home improvement contractor's work).


tract for sale, and imposing a duty on all sellers to disclose disclaimers seems a harsh solution. Yet, a subsequent purchaser without notice of disclaimers would rely as heavily on a builder's expertise as if there were no disclaimers. Requiring that disclaimers be recorded, either in or along with a home's title, seems a more equitable and feasible solution. This method is suggested by the Uniform Land Transactions Act, which imposes a duty on professional vendors to assure a subsequent purchaser's notice of disclaimer in the original sale of a home.\textsuperscript{116}

Oklahoma also requires that a purchaser of goods notify a commercial seller of breach of an implied warranty within a reasonable time, or the breach is not actionable.\textsuperscript{117} Although Elden, Jeanguneat, Jones and Old Albany did not discuss the requirement of notice of defect to a seller or remote seller, the plaintiffs in each case alleged that they gave notice to the builder-vendor or manufacturer prior to filing suit. At least two other states have held expressly that notice of a construction defect be given to the builder-vendor within a reasonable time of discovery, and that the builder-vendor be given a chance to remedy the defect before recovery on an implied warranty theory is allowed.\textsuperscript{118}

It seems unfair not to require that the builder be given notice and an opportunity to repair defective work or replace materials, unless the situation is so obviously hopeless that notice would be unnecessary or ineffective.\textsuperscript{119} If this issue is brought before the Oklahoma Supreme Court, it is hoped that a subsequent purchaser will be required to notify the builder-vendor of defects and to give the builder a reasonable opportunity to repair before a suit is allowed. As noted earlier, the burden should be on a builder-vendor to show that a subsequent purchaser had notice of warranty disclaimers before the builder-vendor is permitted to use disclaimers as a defense to a breach of warranty claim.

\textsuperscript{116.} Uniform Land Transactions Act § 2-312(c), comment 3 (1975). Section 2-312(c) provides that disclaimers of warranties of quality do not affect "successors in interest" who had no reason to know of the disclaimers when title was conveyed, but that reason to know exists if the disclaimer appears in the deed or other recorded document granting the property. Comment 3 states that a seller who is in the business of selling real estate is required to be sure that subsequent purchasers are aware of warranty disclaimers. \textit{Id.}


\textsuperscript{119.} \textit{See, e.g.}, Orto v. Jackson, — Ind. App. —, 413 N.E.2d 273, 276 (1980) (purchaser's failure to give builders notice of certain defects was not necessary to recovery on those defects after builder had clearly shown his intent not to remedy any more defects).
C. Parties to the Action

It appears unlikely that a vendor who was not in the business of building and selling homes could be held liable to a subsequent purchaser on an implied warranty theory. This view is supported by the Oklahoma appeals court's refusal to allow the Eldens to sue their immediate sellers, the Simmonses. In addition, the Oklahoma Supreme Court was careful to say in both Old Albany Estates and Elden that a purchaser in the "chain of distribution" could bring suit against the manufacturer of goods (or a home) for alleged breach of warranty. The court also carefully drew the analogy of builder-vendor Riggs to a manufacturer. A 1980 Indiana case, Vetor v. Shockey, also supports this limitation. The Indiana court reasoned that a non-builder vendor of a home is in about the same bargaining position as a subsequent purchaser and stated:

While the public interest may well be served by placing repair or replacement costs of a new home on the responsible vendor-builder who created the defect and is in a better economic position to bear the cost than the purchaser, these policy considerations are inapplicable where the house is an older one and the seller is not its builder.

Thus, the range of potential defendants in suits seems fairly well-defined: Those who are in the business of building and selling homes hold themselves out as competent to do the work and impliedly warrant what they sell. The range of potential plaintiffs, however, is not as clear. The policy espoused in Elden and Old Albany Estates to avoid a series of lawsuits, coupled with the glaring lack of a strong policy statement otherwise, indicates that a subsequent purchaser of commercial property also should be able to sue for latent defects that become manifest after he takes possession. However, it appears doubtful that such a cause of action would be allowed for buildings used for purely commercial purposes, due to the consistent conjunction of a warranty of workmanlike construction with a warranty of habitability throughout Jones, Jeangunear, and Elden. The Oklahoma court apparently intends for warranty extension beyond transfer of title to apply only to workmanlike construction upon living quarters. Whether the

120. 631 P.2d at 741.
122. Id. at __, 414 N.E.2d at 577.
implied warranty would be denied to commercial, rental apartment construction, however, is not clear.

Other problems in this area involve plaintiffs whose builder-vendor cannot be found and plaintiffs living in reconditioned apartments which have been converted into condominiums. It currently appears that the subsequent purchaser of a home which is not insured under a private warranty program in Oklahoma may be without recourse if he cannot find his builder-vendor when a defect appears. Other states have taken different approaches to this problem. In New Jersey, for example, all builders are required to register with the state, and a prerequisite to registration approval is membership in a state-sponsored warranty program, or a private, state-approved program backed by insurance or bonds. 124 California's judiciary tried a different approach several years ago, when it imposed tort liability on the financiers of a speculative, residential tract development, in favor of the home purchasers, after the builder-vendor of the homes disappeared. 125 Of the two approaches, the former attacks the problem more directly. A statutory mandate for builders to insure their work would keep the builders free from further government interferences, motivate them to perform well to avoid higher insurance rates, and protect home purchasers from non-recoverable loss at the same time.

Purchasers of apartments which have been converted into condominiums also may have problems applying Elden to their situation if a defect arises. If the converted complex is a very old apartment building, certainly no warranty from the original builder-vendor would remain attached. Yet, commercial developers of the complexes often claim to have done extensive renovation work on such buildings, and lure buyers with low interest rates and the promise of desirable amenities. What sort of burden would it place on the purchaser to hold him to a reasonable inspection of the premises if the complex he is considering has 100,000 square feet of space and 250 units, each with its own roof, outside stairways, etc., known as common elements, for which the purchaser shares financial responsibility? A solution to this problem is not indicated in Elden or its predecessors. However, if Elden is used to

Impose implied warranties to renovation work, it seems reasonable to hold the developer of converted condominiums liable for all latent defects in his work, as well as for defects in the property of which the developer had notice when he purchased, if he fails to expressly disclaim implied warranties as to those specific defects.

D. Duration of the Implied Warranties and Applicable Statute of Limitations

The duration of implied warranties is perhaps the most troubling of the areas of the law remaining vague after the Elden decision. The Elden court held that implied warranties last for a reasonable period of time. The matter of whether a warranty was in effect when the defect was discovered is to be determined by a jury. Finally, the court applied the five year statute of limitations associated with actions on a written contract. The implication is that an action for breach will be maintainable for five years from the time the breach is discovered (or reasonably should have been discovered). A jury would then determine if the warranty was still in effect. However, Oklahoma’s Commercial Code expressly provides that a cause of action for breach of warranty in a contract for sale of goods accrues at the time of delivery unless the warranty is explicitly prospective in nature. Because the court has applied section 2-725 to materials used in home construction, the door is open for arguing that delivery will determine the time of breach of the implied warranty where defective materials are involved. Thus, it is not clear what the Elden court meant when it said a jury will determine whether the warranties were still in effect “at the time of the breach.” This area must be clarified to avoid endless confusion in future cases.

126. Okla. Stat. tit. 12, § 95 (1971). Causes of action sounding in tort to recover damages arising from design, planning, or construction of improvements to real property are governed by Okla. Stat. tit. 12, § 109 (Supp. 1980). The section flatly provides that no tort actions for design or construction defects or injury to person or property caused by the defects may be brought more than ten years after substantial completion of the improvement.


(1) An action for breach of any contract for sale must be commenced within five years after the cause of action has accrued. By the original agreement the parties may reduce the period of limitation to not less than one year but may not extend it.

(2) A cause of action accrues when the breach occurs, regardless of the aggrieved party’s lack of knowledge of the breach. A breach of warranty occurs when tender of delivery is made, except that where a warranty explicitly extends to future performance of the goods and discovery of the breach must await the time of such performance the cause of action accrues when the breach is or should have been discovered.

128. See infra note 131.

129. 631 P.2d at 741.
Several courts have adopted the rule that where a latent defect is involved, the statute begins running at the time of discovery. Oklahoma may follow a similar rule, but it is still uncertain. If the cause of action is considered to accrue at the time of delivery to the first purchaser, many cases of latent defects in home construction may be without remedy. The implication from the standard of reasonable duration in *Elden* is that different parts of a home may be warranted for different time periods, and an unbending time limit on claims for alleged defects is inconsistent with the traditional flexibility of a reasonableness approach. It is hoped that the Oklahoma court intends to permit claims for five years after a defect is discovered, or reasonably should have been discovered.

VI. Conclusion

With the decision in *Elden v. Simmons* Oklahoma joined a growing minority of states who have acknowledged the right of a subsequent purchaser of a home to attempt to recover from the builder-vendor for defects in the structure. Some have hailed similar decisions in other states as one more step toward solving problems of shoddy construction and unknowing, detrimental reliance by purchasers on unethical builders’ work. Criticism of such decisions has focused primarily on fear that builders will become virtual insurers of the homes they build, fear that subsequent purchasers will use the judicial system as a crutch to avoid the free enterprise principle of freedom of contract, and fear that because there are no pre-set guidelines to follow, as there are with sales

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131. See *Hepp Bros.* v. Evans, 420 P.2d 477 (Okla. 1966), where the court stated in the third syllabus: “If a warranty relates to a future event, before which the defect cannot be discovered with reasonable diligence, the warranty is prospective in character and the applicable period of limitations runs from the time of that event.” In *Hepp* Hepp Brothers had installed tile in the Evans’ new home in August, 1960. In August, 1963, the Evans filed suit alleging breach of warranty because the tiles had started coming loose a year earlier. Defendants claimed the action was barred by a three-year limitation on actions for contracts not in writing. The trial court, without addressing the issue of whether the contract was written, allowed the claim. The supreme court affirmed, holding that the action was not barred because the cause of action accrued upon discovery, due to the prospective nature of the warranty. *See also* Sampson Const. Co. v. Farmers Cooperative Elevator Co., 382 F.2d 645 (10th Cir. 1967), where the court of appeals interpreted Oklahoma’s limitation statute as allowing the cause of action to accrue upon discovery, when the warranty is prospective in nature.

The cases suggest that implied warranties of workmanlike construction and habitability would be construed as prospective in nature, and therefore not breached until discovery.
of goods, the judiciary is creating a confusing and vague doctrine in an area that should be governed by state legislatures.

From the *Elden* opinion, alone, it is difficult to judge the validity of these arguments when applied to Oklahoma. Looking at the decision in light of prior policies and restrictions, and other courts' interpretations of similar decisions, it appears that such criticism is unwarranted. Only latent defects appear to be actionable, and these will be judged by a standard of reasonable construction. Disclaimers of certain warranties also appear to remain effective, as long as a subsequent purchaser has knowledge of such disclaimers. Notice to the builder and an opportunity to repair an alleged defect has been required by several other states, including California, and there is no reason to expect otherwise in Oklahoma. It appears unlikely that a right to sue on the warranties will be extended beyond the class of residential homebuyers who were plaintiffs in the *Jones, Jeanguneat*, and *Elden* opinions. The actual duration of the warranty is somewhat uncertain, due to ambiguous language used by the *Elden* court as to the time when a breach is deemed to have occurred and the applicable statute of limitations. However, application of a breach on discovery rule, coupled with the standard of reasonableness as to the continued effectiveness of an implied warranty, appears to be the court's implication. Admittedly, these summations can only be drawn from appearances from Oklahoma's prior law and other state court interpretations. The *Elden* decision, itself, is much too vague to offer such conclusions. Perhaps future opinions concerning construction warranties will be more concrete.

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