

Interview: Living in Place with Larry Taff

Posted by Leslie Jackson on February 11, 2010

Larry Taff heads [TZ of Madison, Inc.](#), a long-time family business that performs remodels on homes with a much needed twist. His excellent designs and up-to-date knowledge of residential energy efficiency help aging people whose requirements are changing stay in their homes longer. TZ of Madison won also won the NARI of Madison Contractor of the Year Award for the Universal Design category for the 2nd year in a row. Larry will be speaking at the [Better Business Better Buildings Conference](#), which takes place March 3-5, 2010 at the Kalahari Resort and Convention Center, Wisconsin Dells, WI.



Leslie Jackson: I notice you have several certificates in home performance auditing, and it looks like some home performance contractor's certificates as well.

Larry Taff: It's an ongoing thing. It's a philosophy in our company to keep up with all the latest in support of our business focus of modifying homes for people with special needs to be able to stay in them safely for as long as possible.

LJ: Are other companies doing what you do?

LT: There are some. The [National Association of Home Builders \(NAHB\)](#) created CAP: the Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists. (By the way, I don't like the acronym. I prefer Living in Place). There are a number of people who have done it for as long as I have, or who have the background in the various needs. I have also in this past year worked with [NARI \(National Association of the Remodeling Industry\)](#) in developing a new program they call Universal Remodeler. I've actually just received that certification. I helped write the questions as well as about six other people around the country. People are realizing that satisfying the changing needs of the aging is going to be a lot larger segment of the industry...and that additional communication will be needed in order to help people work through what they actually need.

LJ: How are you seeing your clientele change? I'm imagining sometimes they teach you something, sometimes you teach them something. Are you seeing their attitudes and things that they ask you for changing over the years?

LT: Madison is kind of a unique market in that most people are fairly well educated and have access to the internet. So I think most of the time they have more education on specific products than I have, because I don't have time to research every particular product. But I try to bring them our broad knowledge of the whole building envelope and give them my experience in what we've done to all parts of the home.

LJ: And are they concerned mostly about comfort or expense or beauty? What are their priorities?

LT: In this market, the words I use are functionality and cost. We do everything from a simple window replacement to whole home remodels.

As an example we had a couple...They moved into the new home and they had a laundry room/mudroom that was very small and they wanted to make it larger...We drew the plans up and it was like \$20,000...They didn't want to do that, and asked us if there was any way we could just get the laundry room upstairs...Looking at the options that included just getting a stacked washer-dryer, which gained them energy credits, and having their laundry closer to where they needed it, (saving them trips up and down the stairs), they decided to turn a third bedroom into a laundry room and take the machine out of their mudroom, making it larger. It's an example of energy efficiency and also the adaptability for somebody with special needs.

LJ: This kind of adaptation is helping some people to stay with their families longer.

LT: We just did a bathroom for a gal whose mother has been in a limited care facility for two years. She has some health issues and alzheimers. She was afraid she wasn't getting the care she really needed ... When the daughter visited the rest home, there were hornets buzzing around her and she said, "That's it I'm going to move her back to my house." We installed a ramp so she could have zero steps going into the house and the mother is living at home now with the daughter... She has staff come in to be with her during the day...It also frees up some of her time because she isn't going back and forth. That's an example of sharing under a single household, as well.

LJ: That's a lovely model. I hope to see more of that, especially when someone is at the age to be between facilities: To need more support than living alone, but not as much support as a full-care facility.

LT: That happens most of the time. I can give many other stories like that. We won a project last year with NARI for a woman whose kitchen we modified so she could use it. She was in a wheelchair. She taught out of her home as a tutor and she loved to cook, but she has not been able to use the kitchen. We came in and modified it extensively so that now, she can.

There was another project like that...A person with MS for almost 24 years. She fell down and broke her ankle, but she couldn't go back home because her bath wasn't accessible. After we made it livable for her by widening doorways and installing rails etc, we figure that if she was able to stay in the home for 3 months it would pay for itself.

LJ: And people stay healthier longer, it seems, if they can stay in their own homes, and be with their own families.

LT: Especially if there's dementia and other issues like that, but if they are taken out of their homes and put into a strange facility that can be the last straw for their health.

LJ: When you go and speak at these conferences, is the focus this work that you do?

LT: It depends on what the audience is. I've given talks about this to the general public and the focus is more on the simple things you can do. In the presentation that I'm giving, I'm trying to explain to them why this is going to be much more a part of the market and what some of the things are they have to be aware of...It takes a lot more communication and time to work with clients with special needs. A lot of times, in the older generations, people would rather fall down than admit that they need grab bars, for example. It can be up to the contractor to think about and introduce safety issues, not just to the homeowner, but to their families, caregivers, or legal counsel, whoever may be helping out. You really need to know who the decision makers are.

...I've done enough of them that I know what the typical issues are going to be. If they have MS as an example and they know that that's going to be debilitating...and they can transfer from a bed to a commode by themselves now, but maybe three years from now they aren't going to be able to.

Also that's a part of universal design is what can we do, when you modify a bathroom that it doesn't feel so sterile, that the grab bars don't put off the children, friends and caretakers who visit the house.

Also, making the public aware of the inevitable changes we go through and our changing needs in a home, I have put on seminars for the Madison board of realtors...I made them sit half of the seminar on a wheelchair to get a first hand experience of what I'm talking about.

LJ: What is Universal Design?

LT: They call it Universal Design, but it's really about being able to respond to a really specific set of needs. A Universal Design can be still modified or used by anyone. Universal means it can be used by the largest group of people.

The universal design part of a home and remodeling is really just part of the entire picture that you have to look at and understand how your home fits into what your needs are going to be and into the general public. Not every home is a candidate for a retrofit to accommodate the aging...If it's a tri-level on a hill and not on a bus line— or if it was so poorly constructed then it doesn't make sense to do some more investment.

I love to remodel. I live in a home that was built by my grandfather,

I'm living what I do. That's what I try to show: What people can do.

For more info about Larry Taff's company, TZ of Madison, Inc., go to: www.tzofmadison.com

- See more at: <http://www.homeenergy.org/show/blog/nav/blog/id/66#sthash.xL2WNPcn.dpuf>