



Autodesk® Revit modeling and photographic rendering
by Christopher Davison, AIA, Realty Restoration

You Say You Want a Revolution?

Technology Renovates Communications in the Building Trades

By Jackie Benton

There's a revolution brewing in homebuilding and remodeling these days: one that invokes an exciting spirit of cooperation and collaboration as much as it does the creativity of all involved.

New software, mobile apps and gadgets give homebuilding and remodeling professionals an incredible array of technology from which to choose, allowing them to respond nimbly to job site situations as they crop up, stay on top of timelines, keep their clients informed, and even keep their billing straight. These new technologies have heralded a new wave of connectivity which allows homeowners to take a more participatory role in their home building and remodeling projects.

"I do think our clients want to feel more involved in the process," says John Gehlken of Austin Impressions. "The technology helps them feel more connected. If they are traveling it helps them feel more up-to-date on what's happening on a day-to-day basis. We try to be very proactive with our customers and keep them abreast of what's going on. Our goal is to use innovative technology to solve practical problems. As a homeowner, you want that kind of transparency."

Gehlken has made incorporating technology a natural part of his business plan, and carries with him his holy trinity of tech: his laptop, iPhone and iPad. "Our goal is to use innovation and technology to solve practical problems. We can now keep everyone up-to-date, and the homeowner has a very non-confrontational way to communicate with me. I can see problems as they are coming up because it's part of this communication process, and I am aware of what's going on with a project."

Dylan Martin agrees with Gehlken's assessment of how technology has changed his business for the better. Back in the not-so-distant past, Martin, president of Dylan Martin Homes and Remodeling, would visit job sites with a slew of three-ring binders chock full of paperwork pertaining to each of his job sites. "I used to carry around four crates of binders because I wanted to have all the information at my fingertips. I sometimes had to stop the job and go back to the office to find what I needed. With my iPad, no matter where I am, I have everything I need about my projects handy. We also use our iPads and iPhones to take digital photographs, which we store on Dropbox and BuilderTrend, that can be shared with everyone including subcontractors, homeowners and the entire staff at Dylan Martin Homes."

How high-tech helps today's building trades professionals doesn't stop there, says Martin. "Our technology starts in the field and continues in our office. We use Adobe Acrobat X to create visual documents describing the project and what we will be doing. This really helps everyone understand the project and keeps everyone on track. Our favorite app is BuilderTrend, a project management program used not only for managing the project but keeping the client updated on every aspect of their project. We can assign tasks, add notes, share all files, post pictures, and track

change orders and selections. BuilderTrend is used by everyone involved in the project, from the subcontractors to the designers to the homeowners. They can see the calendar, track the progress, and add documents and notes."

Dylan Martin says his company's clients love the ease with which they can check on their project's progress, as well as the ease with which they can email any questions or concerns. For his part, Martin appreciates how the constant communication allows him to spend more time with his family. "I don't get phone calls at 8:00 p.m. when I'm at home with my family. Our clients can email a list of questions, and we get answers to them promptly," he says.

In addition to keeping track of communications, builders and designers are finding new software and apps that make communications much easier for themselves and their clients. "There are so many hats we have to wear in this business, from the actual design to the invoicing, and my day would be twice as long without these technologies," says Jenny Silverman, office manager for Top Notch Renovations. Silverman says there are several favorite programs her team uses on a regular basis.

"We love Penultimate. It has a light graph background, and you can quickly create sketches," says an enthusiastic Silverman. "It's used by our designers, especially when they have very specific ideas about where things should be, and we can create their vision exactly. We've found Penultimate and the specificity it offers allows the designer and the client to decide exactly how things should go in the beginning so there's no confusion at the end of the job. This way, we end up with a perfect project while saving money."

Silverman says applications and software can help their clients communicate more effectively with her team to create a perfect, personalized home design. "Houzz is one of our favorites for our clients," she says. "The customer can tell us with visuals exactly what they like and put together an Ideabook. Houzz also offers a way to source — there are little tags that hang down on the products so you can send a note to the poster and inquire where they got those items."

Christopher Davison, AIA, with Realty Restoration especially loves the ability software gives him to share key concepts with his clients.

Davison uses Autodesk® Revit, a software specifically created for Building Information Modeling (BIM), and considers it the workhorse behind all his designs. "For years, design and construction documents were separated into different programs: one for visual representation and the other for documentation," he explains. "Revit allows me to design in 3D and work on the construction documents at the same time. Being able to show a client, who would otherwise have trouble visualizing a space, the before and after potential of their kitchen remodel is priceless. Being able to not only explain a tricky barrel vaulted ceiling to my superintendent but show him graphically in three-dimension how to frame it and add that tricky, hidden AC ductwork saves time and money that would have been wasted working things out in the field."

Perhaps there is no better way to understand and embrace the Tech Revolution in home building than when it comes to seeing how it empowers and emboldens home builders and homeowners alike. Armed with open lines of communication, homeowners no longer feel stranded and alone — with a click of a mouse or the touch of a keypad, they can see their project and understand the day's progress. Designers no longer have to worry whether others can visualize their creations, and builders no longer have to wonder whether they are proceeding according to plan. High Tech has taken the guesswork and heartache out of home design, while keeping everyone in the communication loop, thus ensuring every project is a truly collaborative one. ■

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