

Technology Meets Traditions at OakWood

By Wendy Ripmeester of Ottawa Renovates Magazine

Step into any of the 17 bathrooms at OakWood's headquarters on Taylor Creek Blvd in Orleans, and you'll want to see the other 16.

Each is a microcosm of the massive showroom/Design Centre, displaying the latest in fashion, form and technology in completely functional settings. Every bathroom incorporates a unique combination of tile, flooring, countertops, cabinets and fixtures of the latest design and technology.

In some, everything is sensor-controlled: the self-flushing toilets and no-touch faucets with integrated hand-dryers that click on with the wave of your hand.

From the latest home innovations in fixtures, appliances and furniture found in their bathrooms and on the Design Centre floor, to state-of-the-art green building and "smart" systems in their LEED Platinum headquarters, technology is integral to every aspect of OakWood's business model, including – perhaps especially – behind the scenes, where OakWood's proprietary software supports advanced design and project management processes.

These advanced systems offer distinct advantages, where efficiencies and economies of scale for the company translate into the highest quality products and services and best value-for-money for the client.

Technology is as central to the business today as the traditional family values the company was built upon "yesterday", when, 60 years ago, OakWood President and CEO John Liptak Jr.'s father started his construction business in Ottawa.

But tech hasn't replaced tradition. Just as OakWood's modern Design Centre incorporates a white painted brick wall from John Liptak Sr.'s original office as a prominent reminder of the company's foundation, so OakWood's technology builds upon and reinforces long-standing company values, like integrity and respect for clients, employees and the environment.

Technologies may be everywhere in OakWood's approach to home renovation services, but "it's completely transparent", says Liptak. It doesn't stand out "in your face", and systems are fully integrated to enhance the client experience, starting on the Design Centre floor.

While you expect toilets and faucets to work in the bathroom, you wouldn't expect the same in the average showroom. But OakWood's Design Centre is far from "average". Nothing is "just" on display here. Everything works – from sinks to showers – right in the Design Centre.

And each vignette is beautifully staged so visitors can experience it as they would their own home. There's décor-matching cutlery and pots in the kitchen cabinets, and spices and Tabasco sauce in the pantry drawer by the stove. A full bottle of champagne rests in the ice bucket beside a freestanding designer bath tub. Only the fact that the ice cubes aren't melting gives away that they're not real.

Traditional exteriors of wood and wrought iron disguise modern features, like self-closing drawers and cabinet doors that glide shut as if nudged by an invisible hand – standard features in OakWood's own line of cabinetry.

Contemporary technologies such as LED-lighted closet rods and shoe racks in the walk-in "Sex-in-the-City" closet, as Liptak calls it, provide subtle, yet elegant touches to home design that showcase the designer shoes, handbags and clothes that give the closet a real feel.

Like the working bathrooms in the OakWood building, each Design Centre scene demonstrates different configurations of fixtures and furnishings – for example, under the counter storage systems – to show homeowners the full range of possibilities.

With features like push-to-open and electric cupboard doors, free floating stairs and iPhone controlled steam showers, OakWood purposefully pushes the limits of clients' imaginations to ask "What if?" when thinking through their dream renovation or new home.

"It's not just a design centre," Liptak says, "It's an inspiration centre. It's meant to encourage brainstorming and idea generation."

And because the fully functional Design Centre blends with OakWood's office space and on-site seminar rooms, clients experience first-hand the working green building and smart systems that have made OakWood's headquarters a candidate for the highest Leadership in Engineering and Environment certification in Canada – LEED Platinum; the "greenest of the green" as ranked by the Canada Green Building Council.

OakWood offers clients the ability to include these systems in their own design: heated floors, energy efficient lighting, fully automated systems controlled by motion, sound and heat sensors, wireless technology to remotely manage home systems, and low-flow plumbing, to create homes and spaces with the highest indoor environmental quality

and lowest ecological footprint.

Low or no VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) content in building materials is a base standard, but “clients can go as green as they want,” Liptak says. And OakWood can provide expert advice on how to design and build renovations and new homes in a way that measurably reduces the impact on the environment while improving energy efficiency.

Nothing at OakWood’s headquarters is off limits to the client’s imagination, and everything is fair game for inspiration. Except for anything that might distract, that is. Like clutter.

Brochures and sample moldings, tiles, and windows are tucked out of sight in drawers and cupboards. And though clients are encouraged to touch and interact with features in Design Centre exhibits as they would in their own home, you won’t find any fingerprints on chrome or countertops.

“It’s one person’s full time job to clean this place,” *Liptak says.*

Without distractions, Design Centre inspiration becomes instant gratification with the ability to scan QR codes – machine-readable Quick Response Codes – available on every Design Centre product, with a smart phone or Microsoft Surface Pro. This app, which allows clients to explore the “What if?” of their project with no waiting, inserts replicas of scanned products directly into a 3D rendering of their project created by a designer using photographs and laser measurements of their home.

If clients change their mind or wish to experiment with different styles, it’s not a problem. Changes can be made on a dime by scanning the QR code of a different item in the showroom, or choosing from hundreds of products – 120,000 and growing – from OakWood’s database.

Once it’s all pulled together, clients can see their dream renovation or new home in full colour on a 55”-75” 4k high resolution LED screen in a private viewing room. And there’s much more for clients to see and experience through their password protected, cloud-based Client Portal.

OakWood’s proprietary software is a project management, materials selection and client management system rolled into one.

“It’s like Microsoft Outlook on steroids,” *says Liptak.*

Everything related to a client's project is there: the proposal, job costing breakdown, payment schedule, work orders, and detailed Gantt chart detailing every milestone from the pre-construction meeting through to final inspection and much more.

Inventoried room-by-room breakdowns also track every product – like baseboards – down to the model number, description, specifications and price.

“Everything is there,” says Liptak, “right down to the door-stopper.” And project costs are updated instantly to reflect any changes clients make.

Liptak says one of the advantages of the software is that all selections for an entire project can be done in three meetings. By comparison, “It would take literally six to seven weeks of driving to different places all over the city to look at tile, plumbing, kitchen cabinets, etc. and not having the ability to have a designer beside you who coordinates all the products.”

But in the software, he says, “We’ll have the counter next to the backsplash, with the colour of room – a complete collage with the actual finish – all right there. And it can be done while you’re sipping your morning coffee.”

Liptak has brought major advancements to the construction industry through OakWood’s program, now in its seventh version.

“We’ve invested heavily in our software,” Liptak says of the system he started developing seven years ago. “I took all my knowledge and put it into code.” And that’s over 47 years.

From an early age, Liptak says, his father “made him” learn the ropes of the construction business from top to bottom – or rather from bottom to top. He started sweeping job sites at age 11; but early on he developed a passion for computer technology, and planned to leave the construction business to become a computer programmer.

Even so, at his dad’s prompting, he went through the construction training: thermal dynamics, HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and finally, the business side.

“And that’s when I decided to stay in the construction industry and bring the computer technology into it,” says Liptak.

The rest, as they say, is history.

And even though OakWood employs developers and database managers in Vancouver, the United States and India – including 36 programmers in Belarus – Liptak is

enthusiastic about remaining hands on. He takes care of all the spreadsheet formulas and screen shots himself.

“I love it,” he chuckles. “At five in the morning I’m online with the Belarusians.” While building the software meant a lot of extra work up-front, Liptak stands behind the benefits of this significant investment to his company, and more importantly, his clients.

“The technology,” he says, “puts everyone on the same page – or tablet.”

And this goes a long way to helping homeowners avoid some major pitfalls, like those he describes in the Insider Report, “[Avoid Renovation Disaster](#)”, available on the [OakWood website](#).

In the report, Liptak says that homeowners should beware when they see short proposals, too-good-to-be-true price quotes, or when a time schedule for the project is not included in an estimate. As he explains, “poor planning is the number one reason most projects go off-the-rails and over budget”. On the flip side, “planning is hands down the number one secret to a successful project.”

OakWood’s comprehensive system has got planning covered: with detailed, itemized proposals (up to 150 pages or more) for every project, no matter how small; firm quotes that don’t budge from the project budget unless homeowners say so; and Gantt charts that show every step of the project in sequence.

And with the Client Portal, homeowners know instantly what stage of the project they’re at all the time.

“It’s a double-edged sword,” Liptak laughs, “and almost too much information as clients regularly check-in to check up on the work.”

But on a more serious note, he reflects, “You know what? Clients are so much more educated and so much more in tune with what’s going on. We’re not hiding anything. We’re not hiding costs; we’re not hiding the process – anything. It’s the difference between just letting people know and telling them everything they need to know. It’s about respect. The client is part of the team.”

Technology leadership is one of the reasons residential home improvement contractor and television show host Mike Holmes endorses OakWood as “Ottawa’s only Holmes-approved contractor”. For Holmes, OakWood’s detailed planning, client and project management systems and use of industry leading-edge eco-wise products that help protect the home and homeowner are essential qualities contractors need to “get it

right”.

Looking to the future, OakWood is constantly experimenting with new technologies that push the envelope on the job site and in the Design Centre. 3D cameras, expected to come on stream in three to four years, are being tested now inside additions to verify materials and to make sure safety and specs are correct.

But it’s Microsoft HoloLens that will “blow the industry out of the water”,
Liptak says.

Wearing the HoloLens headset, OakWood clients will be able to stand in the middle of their virtual kitchen, drag-and-drop in different countertops and appliances, then walk around the room to see what it looks like from another vantage point, all while interacting with a designer who sees exactly what they do.

While Liptak claims he could talk technology all day, what he values most about his business reflects his company’s roots.

“I get to see my family every day,” he says, describing the daily ritual that gathers his wife, two daughters, and son-in-law – all OakWood employees – into the kitchen to talk shop.

“

Our grandkids are there. We have Spenny the dog there. We’re eating lunch, we’re talking business. We have Mike Holmes on the phone. The dog is barking, the grandkids are crying... We don’t care – we love it. I wish we could stop the clock.”

Sounds like a new family tradition.

But as time and technology are not likely to slow down – my hunch is neither will OakWood.