

Today's architects: spearheading top-quality residences

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

Wanted: Landscape architect for residential projects. Must be able to gain confidence—including friendship—of homeowner clients. Strong sales ability. Superior supervisory skills. Ability to work hand-in-hand with co-workers and

contractors alike while developing and executing construction projects of various sizes (usually several at various stages

of completion simultaneously).

Oh, by the way, applicant must have proven design and site planning skills.

If you think that's asking too much of today's landscape architect (LA), the residential design/build landscape market may be passing you by.

Judson Griggs of Lied's Landscape Design & Development in Sussex, Wis., detailed what's expected of today's LA at last winter's ALCA Conference.

It opened a few eyes, judging by the questions that flowed from some of the 200-plus contractors in the audience.

Griggs, himself, is a landscape architect. He's one of 11 on the Lied's staff. (He's also 1996 president elect of ALCA.)

But, to describe Griggs or any of the others on that staff, as an LA is like describing Dan Marino as "just a football player."

They're, in effect, the quarterbacks in Lied's residential design/build business. It's a market in which the company excels, but it's a tough market.

"The residential work that we do is involved and it's challenging," says Griggs. "When I talk to clients,



This Lied's project shows what a dramatic and positive impact a well-designed and installed landscape can have on a home. A landscape architect may have to do a lot of client hand-holding in a residential job like this. The benefits—higher profits, customer satisfaction and loyalty—are well worth it.



I'm talking about dealing with their outdoor environment...the entire outside of their property."

Although some contractors chase commercial design/build work because it's generally a larger ticket item and perceived to present fewer hassles, residential design/build has a lot going for it.

"There are higher profits in residential design/build work," says Griggs. "But you're going to work for it; you're going to work *hard* for it."

Also, residential work comes at a steadier pace. It's not as likely to follow boom or bust fluctuations in the economy.

Another difference: while commercial property owners look at the competitive advantage that landscaping can give them (they see it in light of return on investment), homeowners approach landscaping more emotionally.

That fact dictates that residential design/build requires more hand-holding from the landscape provider, more patience, and usually more meetings.

Crucial to this process, the LA must learn—really *learn*—what each homeowner wants, says Griggs. The LA must build a bond of trust and confidence in each client and, in fact, make the process fun and enjoyable for that client.

"You're dealing with feelings and emotions, and you've got to understand your clients as people," says Griggs.

He says he sees two market trends that favor the continued growth of residential design/build.

Busy two-income families are increasingly willing to pay somebody else for landscapes and services. Also, families are "cocooning" in their homes. Some have safety concerns about going out at night; others are too tired.

"Comfort and convenience are more important than price, and I see that as an opportunity for us," says Griggs.

Lied's relies strongly on its LAs to meet this opportunity.

Their involvement in a project begins as early as possible. Ideally, it starts with meetings with architects and builders as the home itself is being planned and designed.

At Lied's, anyway, the LA sells, designs, does the estimates, and then serves as the

▶ *'When I talk to clients, I'm talking about dealing with their outdoor environment, the entire outside of their property.'*
— Judson Griggs,
Lied's in Wisconsin.



liaison between client and production to the project's completion.

One of the most crucial steps in this process is the handoff from sales/design to construction. That's when the build crew gets the job packet with plans, bid sheets and any other information specific to that job.

"There can be no surprises to the client," he stresses.

Griggs says it's a good idea to introduce homeowners to foremen and crew leaders as construction commences. Hopefully, the client and construction leaders will form a link. But the client's primary contact remains with the LA.

While most new LAs come to Lied's with strong design skills, they generally work as design assistants alongside more experienced LAs first. Then, as they learn the company's philosophy, they're given more sales responsibilities.

"We seem to like to make our work complex and complicated," says Griggs, half joking. □

8 steps to residential success

Be recognized as the best in a particular market niche. High-end design/build? Turf renovation? Stone work? Water features?

Develop a client-sensitive design staff. If, for instance, your company's forte is high-end, the design staff must be able to deal with clients on their level, including being aware of and involved with community events like symphonies, charity functions, and service organizations.

Keep clients' interests foremost. "Never say to a client, 'if this was my house, I would do it this way,'" says Judson Griggs of Lied's Landscape Design. "It's not your house. What you want to do is deliver what the client wants."

Learn to work with tough, demanding clients, people who are used to getting what they want, but nevertheless recognize value and quality.

Base all decisions on client satisfaction. Discover what's important to individual clients, what they want to get out of their landscapes. Ask for clarification whenever you feel it's needed. Seek specific feedback.

Sell benefits, not features. Homeowners generally don't care about the technical features of, say, a water garden or a brick patio. They want to know how it will give them pleasure and relaxation.

Deliver timely service, but don't sacrifice service for expediency. "If you continually say 'yes, yes, yes' and you can't meet your commitments, you will develop a problem," says Griggs.

Adapt with the market. Homeowners read about beautiful landscapes in colorful, consumer magazines. Increasingly, they're demanding features such as waterfalls, pools, spas, irrigation systems, and lighting systems. □