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AFG BUILDERS, INC.



AFTER THREE DECADES, FRAMING EXPERT FINDS HIS PASSION: GREEN BUILDING

by Katie Gutierrez Painter

Above: This kitchen was part of a 2007 complete renovation in which the entire home was gutted, Atlanta, GA.

WHEN MIKE LABELLE RELOCATED from California to Georgia in 1981, he was in for an unpleasant surprise.

“In California, I was getting paid \$16 per hour as a journeyman carpenter,” LaBelle says. “When my wife and I moved to Atlanta, I was started at \$7 per hour; my rate only ever increased by a dollar per hour. I eventually decided that I could pay myself more.”

Formerly a framer for a restaurant contractor in California, LaBelle made a transition that also included switching from commercial construction to high-end residential framing. Working on homes introduced LaBelle to yet another difference between West and East Coast construction.

“Because Georgia doesn’t have earthquake codes, there aren’t as many



Top: Mike LaBelle, owner and president.
Bottom: Shaw Residence kitchen.

“ I build the house [structurally] in my head—I know how it’s going to be—and then all I have to do is apply a veneer to it. I think I bring something to the table that builders who specialize in design or interior finish can’t offer. ” *Mike LaBelle, Owner & President*

structural tie-downs,” he explains. “A lot of things were done without structural background and knowledge. I learned to adapt as a framer.”

In 1982, LaBelle founded his first company (the now defunct Calanta Framing Company), and for the next decade framed many of Atlanta’s largest homes, which ranged from 5,000 to 20,000 square feet. In 1997, LaBelle partnered with framer Jeff Atkinson to found AFG Builders, Inc. as a way to pool clients and decrease liability. Then, three years later, LaBelle eased the company through a rough transition from framing to remodeling—a change that required him to let go of many of his longtime employees.

“It was like cutting an umbilical cord,” he admits.

Despite the challenges, LaBelle managed to keep many of his employees as subcontractors for his remodeling work. Finally, in 2004, came the most recent transition: AFG Builders became a general contractor.

“After doing 200 to 300 homes, you know how things are built,” says La-

Belle. “Now I build the house [structurally] in my head—I know how it’s going to be—and then all I have to do is apply a veneer to it. I think I bring something to the table that builders who specialize in design or interior finish can’t offer.”

Today, AFG Builders is virtually a one-man mission. (Atkinson opted out of the partnership in 2007.) Rather than using full-time employees, LaBelle keeps his overhead down by using insured subcontractors, including a roofer that he has known for 20 years and a sheetrocker that he has known for 24 years. It also frees him to do what he most enjoys: building. And, in particular, green building.

“Even though they’re big, I think we could still do a lot with these homes using the earth, sun, and the houses’ own water to recycle,” says LaBelle. “I think as Americans we are very wasteful, and I think we have the technology and the people to stop relying on outside sources.”

Case in point: LaBelle recently finished construction of a 7,000-square-foot home with a backyard cistern to be



*Shaw Residence bedroom:
Extended master bed and bath, kitchen,
exterior back redone, and basement,
Atlanta, GA.*



*Thonas Residence kitchen:
Tear down and new construction in 2008,
icing insulation, semi-grained encapsulated house including attic. Moisture barriers condition the entire house.*

“I think as Americans we are very wasteful, and I think that we have the technology and the people to make sure that we stop relying on outside sources.”

Mike LaBelle, Owner and President

used for irrigation. The \$1.4 million build also features a high-efficiency furnace, energy-efficient Kolbe windows, and icening foam insulation.

On another recent build, also 7,000 square feet, LaBelle installed a solar hot-water system and a gray-water tank for showers—which will allow the water to be reused into toilets for between 30 percent and 50 percent water savings. LaBelle also dug a well whose

water, once it meets city requirements, will be used as clean drinking water. With a value of \$2.5 million, the project has been entered into the annual ICF Builder Award Competition.

LaBelle's current project is a 6,800-square-foot green build that will serve as the 2009 Southern Building Showcase home. The \$1 million project will also utilize a solar hot-water system, a high-efficiency furnace, and icening

insulation as well as many other green features. Additionally, the framing materials will be recycled, including grinding sheetrock to be used as organic matter around the trees.

Of his company's continued success, LaBelle says simply, “Homeowners feel my commitment and passion for their projects, but I'm only as good as the people that surround me.” ABQ



Thomas Residence front exterior.