

Shuffling Off to Syracuse

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I had a good time in Syracuse on Tuesday.

Don't laugh. Lots up people go to upstate New York for a good time. That's where Hillary Clinton did her famously successful "listening tours." Even Caroline Kennedy went out there not long ago — and you know something has to be interesting to get her out of Manhattan. For New York's new junior Senator, [Kirsten Elizabeth Rutnik Gillibrand](#), of course, Syracuse is just a two-hour drive out the Thruway from her home town of Albany.

A few quick facts from Wikipedia about Senator Gillibrand, by the way (she's new). At Dartmouth College, the someday-Senator-to-be was known as Tina Rutnik. In Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, where she has also studied, her Chinese name is Lu Tianna. She is an alumna of Albany's prestigious [Academy of the Multiple Names](#).



GreenHomes "advisor" Bill Meadows unloads a window demonstration kit.

But this post actually isn't about New York Senatorial politics. It's about home performance contracting. That's a new kind of remodeling — a new "paradigm" (excuse my Greek) in home energy upgrades. I went out to Syracuse to hang with Frank LaSala, who is the general manager of [GreenHomes America](#), a small company with some big plans. I was there to take some pictures for JLC for a feature article about GreenHomes' methods. The article is being written by Mike Rogers, who is the Senior VP for Market Development for GreenHomes and who, in a previous job for the U.S. Environmental Performance Agency, took the lead in developing the EPA's "Home Performance with Energy Star" program).

Frank LaSala founded the company (originally called EnTherm) with partner Richard Kornbluth back in the 1980s, and built up a solid base of experience doing insulation upgrades and window replacements on existing homes in Syracuse. Around 2001, the two founders decided to re-define themselves as a "home performance" contractor, wrapping their various

energy upgrade measures into a comprehensive whole-house makeover system that relies on careful pre-diagnostic evaluation of a house to determine the case-by-case modifications needed to significantly improve the home's energy performance as well as its air quality and comfort.



Bill Meadows checks a basement for gas leaks.

When the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority ([NYSERDA](#)) kicked off its Home Performance with Energy Star program (one of the earliest and most advanced state programs), the agency picked Frank and Richard's company as their pilot contractor. (Few if any other contractors in the state were ready to take on the comprehensive, systematic approach the program calls for.) And recently, the two decided to take their company to the next level by selling out to GreenHomes America, a home-energy startup with major national backing. Now, as the Syracuse unit for GreenHomes, the former EnTherm is the prototype for a company model that GreenHomes plans to take nationwide into any market where existing homes have the potential for 20%, 30%, or 50% reductions in energy use. Which means, pretty much everywhere.



A GreenHomes crew member suits up for attic insulation work.

That business model combines advanced building science with nitty-gritty on-site details like air sealing and insulation. As Frank LaSala explained it to me, this makes marketing a challenge. The existing mind-set in home improvement is very piecemeal, and it's mostly about products. Most towns and cities have insulation contractors, window replacement companies, and HVAC contractors. In very few markets, however, do those three trades all work as part of a single company. Likewise, there are very few companies that use comprehensive building diagnostics — blower doors, infrared cameras, smoke pencils, the works — to figure out just which upgrades make sense for each house, and in what order.

Frank said, "There is no section in the Yellow Pages for 'Home Performance Contracting.' So we run an ad in the Replacement Windows section, in the Heating and Cooling section, and in the Insulation section." The company's radio ads emphasize different products in different seasons — replacement windows in the spring, for example, and furnace replacements in the fall. But when clients call, the company

doesn't send a salesman out to push products. Instead, they send an "Advisor" who does a comprehensive home evaluation, then recommends a set of upgrades based on the energy savings, air quality improvements, or comfort to be gained. In most situations, air-sealing is the first priority, then insulation. Duct sealing may come before an equipment upgrade. In many homes these days, solar hot water makes economic sense (even in upstate New York). Windows, although they're an easy sell, may actually be last on the list.

If GreenHomes' vision works out, this approach is going to spread across the nation. Will it work everywhere? Well, what can I tell you? It seems to be working in Syracuse.



A GreenHomes insulation truck outside a Syracuse house. Marketing through traditional channels, GreenHomes is pioneering a new "home performance" remodeling concept.

About the Blogger

Ted Cushman



Ted Cushman attended Harvard College in Cambridge, Mass., served for 4 years as a U.S. Army paratrooper, and worked as a frame and finish carpenter for 7 years before joining the staff of The Journal of Light Construction (JLC), where he anchored the news desk for 4 years and edited technical and business feature articles. In his 15-year career as a construction photo-journalist, Ted has earned a national reputation for insightful, accurate, and practical coverage of homebuilding techniques, building science, and housing economics. Ted now covers the homebuilding industry as a freelance writer from his base in the hills of Western Massachusetts, where he lives with his wife, psychiatrist Cynthia Cushman. Ted and Cynthia have three sons (Jack, Adrian, and Isaiah).