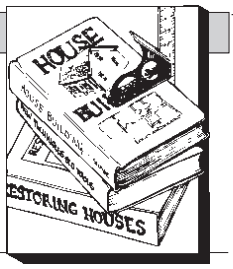
New Methods



Builder's and Contractor's Guide to New Methods and Materials in Home Construction, by Larry Emerson and Walter Oleksky. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: *Prentice-Hall, 1983. 272 pages hardcover; $45.*

by Paul Hanke

My first impression of this book was that the publishers had used thick paper for the pages in an effort to "pad" the book and make it seem more than it is. In many ways this impression was borne out as I read.

The authors of *Builder's and Contractor's Guide to New Methods and Materials in Home Construction* open with an introductory survey to gauge whether you're up to date on tools, materials and changing markets. If you're a progressive builder who regularly reads *NEB*, you'll do well on the survey and probably don't need this book.

Nearly half the book is devoted to a general overview of estimating, print reading, "new" tools and "the house of the future." The authors' estimating advice is extremely simplified and lacks detailed guidance on take-offs, although sample estimating forms are included (in tiny print).

There's a description of typical architectural drawings, but the only examples are a selection of common symbols. And the use of computers for estimating is given only the briefest passing reference.

The tool chapter focuses primarily on the old basics that everyone in the trades probably owns already, although it describes a few tools that are quite new indeed (at least to me)—a four-way post level and a spring-loaded chalk line, for example. Overall, the material on tools doesn't live up to the promise conveyed by the "new" in the chapter's title.

One also might disagree with the authors' opinion that pneumatic tools are most useful for *remodeling* work as opposed to new construction. In addition, the authors note that the use of framing squares is becoming obsolete in this age of prefab roof trusses. This may be true to some extent, but the existence of handy rafter-table books, which are a real boon to anyone doing rafter layout in the field, is completely ignored.

Finally, the "house of the future" material consists of the most cursory overview of modular planning, domes, earth shelters, envelope houses and passive-solar design.

Beginning with Chapter 5, however, the book has more to offer on new methods and materials—but not without some throwbacks to the "old" ways of doing things. For instance, the foundation chapter explains how to use the Pythagorean theorem for building layout, which has served builders well since the days of ancient Greece. A section on the use of laser transits might have been more in line with the book's purported emphasis.

There also are step-by-step instructions for laying a block-in-mortar wall (although the more innovative technique of surface bonding is not mentioned), charts for sizing footings, and descriptions of several common foundation types. The chapter closes with a detailed, 28-page description of pressure-treated wood foundations, including a column-footing detail I hadn't seen before.

The floor-framing chapter gets into 24-inch o.c spacing, truss joists, cantilevered in-line framing, and up-to-date information on panel ratings. Wall-framing techniques (from traditional timber framing to rigid frames) get a thumbnail sketch, but the authors focus on "engineered" 24-inch o.c. framing with single-layer sheathing/siding. The use of drywall clips gets a favorable recommendation as an alternative to the three-stud corner.

The roof chapter emphasizes the use of prefab and "energy-type" trusses, which may be modern but certainly are well within the scope of conventional practice. Handy tables showing possible cost-savings from some of the foregoing techniques are included in a couple of places throughout the book.

The rest of the text covers insulation (but not *super*-insulation), exterior trim work and interior finish, but it continues with the same mixture of a few innovative ideas scattered amid a bulk of information on conventional practice. Surprisingly, optimum value engineering (OVE) techniques, which one would expect to be emphasized in a book on cutting-edge methods, are given only scattered reference.

Like the first chapter, the entire book tends to be a very general survey of what's new in building technology. The illustrations generally are good, but in most cases they seem to be taken from manufacturer and trade-association literature.

If you're looking for an overview of the subject in one place, you might want to borrow this book from your local library. Otherwise, I think you'd find better coverage of all the information it contains in other sources (there's no bibliography). In any event, I don't think you'd get your money's worth if you purchased this one. ■