# Letters

## Log-Home Crafters Aren't a Vanishing Breed

**To the Editor:**

A comment on the short article "Log Home Demand Growing" (page 4, December 1985): I agree that the demand is increasing. The members of our Minnesota LogCrafter's Association, for which I edit the newsletter, are busier than ever.

But no matter what the North American Log Home Council thinks, we who build with hand-peeled logs and scribe-fit each and every one without chinking are more common than "nationally...several dozen...handcrafters." We have more than 40 full-time builder/members in Minnesota and western Wisconsin alone. (And I hope they *all* subscribe to *NEB*!)

**Robert Wood Chambers**
**Minneapolis, Minn.**

## Concrete Slabs Over Wood Floors

**To the Editor:**

Could you help me with information on thin concrete slabs over a wood-framed floor? I have a large (16' x 25') south-facing room with about 50 square feet of south glass that I want to provide with a heat sink and a durable, low-maintenance floor surface.

Operating on the assumption that the thin slab would be technically feasible, I framed the floor for a 60-pound live load—heavy enough to support floor tile and at least two inches of concrete.

Many people suggest this can't be done, and I'm having difficulty getting consistent and detailed technical information. An excerpt from the American Plywood Association "Design and Construction Guide" mentions thin, lightweight concrete slabs over plywood subfloors, but it gives no details.

My situation is this: The room (which is located over a basement) has a diagonal shiplap subfloor on 2x10 joists 16" o.c., spanning 12½ feet to a central beam. The door thresholds are installed 2½" above the subfloor. I still am considering tile over slab, but I wonder in what sized sections the slab should be poured—and whether it's advisable at all.

I also would appreciate other suggestions for a surface that would be relatively easy to clean and would absorb heat well—perhaps I should consider thick pieces of slate and dispense with the slab entirely?

Any information you can provide will be greatly appreciated.

**Doug Feeney**
**Orange, Mass.**

*In general, your idea is workable. Concrete just* seems *heavy compared to other building materials; actually, it weighs only about 10 pounds per board foot, so a two-inch layer over a floor system would add only about 20 pounds per square foot—well within the capacity of most floors.*

*Among the advantages: Concrete will solidify the floor, allow tiles* to *be applied without eventually cracking off, increase thermal mass and soundproof the building. A three-inch concrete floor also will accept an internal radiant-heat source, such as Solaroll.*

*I do have a few suggestions, however:*

*• A poly base is needed to contain the wet concrete. You don't want it dripping on other construction.*

*• After the concrete has been placed and trowelled, avoid working in the neighborhood of the pour for a week or so—or at least 72 hours. This will prevent flexing of the framing and cracking of the fresh concrete.*

*• Use a monomeric fiber reinforcement in place of welded wire. This method uses about a million pieces of plastic-fiber threads a couple of inches long in each yard; no steel is used. Around here (in Maine), concrete suppliers carry Fibremesh, which can be mixed into the batches for about $10 a yard. It works a lot better than steel mesh for thin slabs.*—Harris Hyman

## Radiant Heat Revisited

**To the Editor:**

Like reader David Thomas (March letters), I have installed radiant electric heat in my ceilings. Our 2,000-plus square feet of heated space will cost us less than $700 for this heating season. I think Mr. Lotz's flip response fails to address the facts stated in Mr. Thomas' letter.

Natural gas simply is not available to many of your readers. I have owned three homes with forced-air systems and have been in an untold number of other ones; I have never found one to be silent. There are degrees of balance, and for heating only I have never seen a forced-air system with the balance that can be obtained by having individual thermostats for every room.

A system that does not move air always will be cleaner than a forced-air system. The simple fact is that if you have a low enough demand for heat, the low initial cost, as well as the long-term operating costs, make radiant electric a very real alternative.

Mr. Lotz's way—gas-fired forced air—may be a fine system, but there are too many alternatives available to hold so narrow a view.

**James P. Chiavelli**
**Brookfield Center, Conn.**

## Hungry Ants

**To the Editor:**

This is in response to the chewed-up polystyrene insulation pictured in your February issue (page 3).

In the fall of 1984, I dismantled a small building (approximately 12 by 16 feet) constructed of 4x8 and 4x12 metal panels insulated with two-inch polystyrene. The panels were set into angle irons, so there wasn't any direct contact with the ground. Since I was going to use the panels for forms, I cut them into required sizes as needed.

The bottom of the polystyrene looked exactly as depicted in your photo; however, four feet up from the base, the panels were devoid of any polystyrene at all. In its place were red and black ants—probably enough live ants to fill a 10-quart pail. (Since the temperature was low, the ants were in a "numb" state.)

Obviously, the polystyrene was neither toxic to the ants nor immune to their destruction. Unfortunately, I instantly destroyed the polystyrene panels, along with the ants, without thinking to take a photo. (I enclose a couple of pictures of a section of waferboard beautifully sculptured by the same ants, however.)

My concern with using polystyrene as exterior "insulation" for foundation walls is more than twofold. When the foundation is backfilled, the panels are bound to be jarred loose, kicked, banged, etc. Consequently, the termites, ants, etc. don't even have to construct their own tunnels to enter a dwelling; they have prefabricated tunnels thanks to the joints of the polystyrene. The bugs could destroy a whole structure without the knowledge of anyone—especially when a "cement" coat is applied over it to camouflage the polystyrene.

In addition, I have removed little balls of polystyrene from where it once filled a cavity for insulation; apparently they had "dissolved" and/or shrunk with age.

I, too, would like to know more about on-the-job experiences with polystyrene. Are we really "advancing" in the correct direction? Our hats off to an excellent publication that is still pursuing!

**Richard G. Kendall**
**R.K. Carriage House, Inc.**
**Acton, Maine**

**Pismire artistry:** *It may look as if this belongs in the Museum of Modem Art, but for now, at least, this piece of ant-carved waferboard is in the home of reader Richard Kendall.*

## Solar Water Heaters Are Worth Considering

**To the Editor:**

I take issue with Bill Lotz's statement that solar water heaters aren't cost-effective in New England (January issue). Solar water heating is cost-effective compared to electricity anywhere in the Northeast and is especially effective in Massachusetts, given the tax credits.

I specify them for 80 percent of my clients. Bill should own one!

**Drew Gillett**
**Bedford, N.H.**

## Kind Words

**To the Editor:**

As you can see from the enclosed information/subscription card, I am both an English teacher and a builder. Because of this dual occupation, I am able to especially appreciate your publication. Not only are the articles timely and informative for a small builder such as I, but they are highly readable and literate.

Compared to some of the other trade mailings I receive, not to mention some of the local newspapers, your paper seems just short of miraculous.

Sorry to have let my subscription slide. Thanks for the reminder and the special offer.

**Jim Higgins**
**Shelton, Conn.**

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**To the Editor:**

I have been the executive officer of this builders' organization since 1958 and have been very involved with our state and national association publications.

Your publication offers more to me in terms of understanding the problems of my average builder-member than anything produced by our affiliates. I feel it is important, as mentioned in your March edition, that I know how a small-

volume builder should calculate profit and be able to offer suggestions for points of reference.

Secondly, you do not headline legislative crisis of little interest to the average small-volume builder or remodeler. Granted, they are concerned, but they feel that problem is solved by paying their association dues (and, in turn, my salary) for relieving them of those worries.

Your articles very properly "zero in" on the builders' everyday experiences and, in some cases, *in*experiences.

**Joseph F. McCue**
**Executive Vice President**
**Rochester Home Builders' Assoc.**
**Rochester, N.Y.**

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**To the Editor:**

I have just received my first issue of your periodical and cannot set it down. Congratulations on a superb product which I have no doubt will lead to better quality construction in the region of its influence.

Having built in New Hampshire, Massachusetts and now Maine, I am familiar with the degree of building "sophistication" in each state (frequently a direct result of code requirements) and believe that your magazine should be in the hands of all Maine builders who take pride in what they do.

Please find a check enclosed and an order form for a gift subscription to a close friend of mine.

**Jeffrey H. Wheeler**
**Alna, Maine**

## . . .But Can They Balance the Books?

**To the Editor:**

I especially like the columns on estimating, legal matters, customer relations, job-cost tracking, etc. —all those necessary things related to doing business as opposed to "building things." Most contractors are good carpenters and poor businesspeople.

**Greg Moore**
**Philadelphia, Pa.**

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**Keep 'em coming....***New England Builder* welcomes letters from our readers. Letters must be signed and include the writer's address. Letters should be sent to *NEB*, P.O. Box 278, Montpelier, Vt. 05602.