

# Editorial

*'We haven't  
heard of  
any problems.'*

Yesterday, I spoke with a construction specifier who said that his rule of thumb is to give a product ten years in the field before spec'ing it on a job. Too many things go wrong, he said, and too many products come and go.

On the other hand, I know many builders who can't wait to try out the latest insulation system, heating system, high-tech window, or low-flush toilet.

Some innovative products work well and become standard practice—low-e windows, for example. Some, such as condensing furnaces, have many problems because they are brought to market before they are ready. Some, such as urea-formaldehyde foam, are disastrous.

Nearly all innovations, however, take extra time to get used

to—the so-called learning curve. And inherent in each is the risk of unanticipated problems that may result in delayed payments,



callbacks—and worse. So why not stay with the tried and true?

I've asked a number of innovation-minded builders why

they stick their necks out by experimenting with the new? Most say they just want to build a better building; they want to give their customers greater comfort, better durability, and lower cost.

Their biggest obstacle, I'm told, is the lack of good information about field performance and problems. Too many manufacturers respond to customers' questions with the pat answer: "We haven't heard of any problems."

An honest appraisal of what the risk-taking builder might run into—and what precautions to take—would be appreciated by both the builder and home buyer. Frank talk will win greater product and company loyalty than slick promotions or pleas of ignorance. ■

—S.B.

## Great Publication, Terrible Format

### To the Editor:

Super publication...the best! But terrible format for those of us who like to have orderly, accessible files. My wife is a librarian and says they simply don't know how to handle such a publication; really screws things up.

Also, very difficult to Xerox articles with this layout. Please consider that a change might up your sales enough to offset the cost of the changeover.

A.A. Hyde  
Etna, N.H.

## Architects Should Learn Carpentry

### To the Editor:

As I watch another beautiful Sunday go by outside as I sit in the office and laboriously crank out another bid, I must vent my frustration.

The project this time is a typical high-end renovation of a big old house, complete with the obligatory granite countertops, Gaggenau appliances, color-core laminate, etc. As usual, the budget the architects gave to the owner is about half of what the job will cost. The young "hotshot" architect has produced lots of pretty pages of meaningless details, some unbuildable, some impractical, some needlessly expensive, some completely ignorant of basic construction practices.

The same old feelings come over me as I wade through this estimate. Why is the person who's never built telling the builder how to build? Why is the person who's never estimated, and doesn't know what things cost, telling the owner this can be built for X amount? The system is wrong and produces much cynicism and antagonism. The solution: Architects should be required to apprentice two to

three years on site before getting certified.

Failing that, they should be limited to detailing the aesthetics and let the builder figure out how to build it.

And the owners should thoroughly research their choice of contractor, realizing that there is no specified job—every contractor will build it differently with varying degrees of quality and expertise.

David Hornstein  
Lighthouse Construction  
Arlington, Mass.

## Expect the Unexpected

### To the Editor:

Two recurring themes seemed to emerge from the articles in the September issue: the need to anticipate "things that go wrong," and the need to plan ahead.

I am reminded of several conversations with Philadelphia architect Charles E. Peterson. Peterson was one of the 1930s originators of HABS (Historical American Buildings Survey), and has been involved in historic preservation and the practice of

architecture for many years. Charles E. Peterson's maxim, when faced with any project involving an existing building, is "The first thing you do is make a set of *existing drawings*." *Accurate*, I might add.

As an architect who has been involved in many remodeling and restoration projects, I have learned from sometimes bitter experience that architects, builders and owners all should follow this advice. One cannot shortcut this aspect of any project without risking disaster. The extra cost of producing a set of measured drawings, complete plans from roof to basement, elevations and sections, may seem excessive. This is small, however, in comparison to the extra expense, time and headaches of trying to change a design and structure during construction.

A seemingly small change or two can, as we all know, rapidly mushroom into unanticipated changes and modifications of structure, finish, doors and windows, mechanical systems and electrical systems. Ignoring a mismatch of ceiling heights during design and hoping to correct this

during construction, for example, is a sure way to "the land of many flames." Reordering doors and windows due to changes is also an easy way to incur the wrath of suppliers, contractors and owners.

Assumptions of existing conditions behind walls, ceilings or floors is a trap we have all fallen into during our practice. It is probably safe to say that one can never assume anything in a remodeling project. Vertical partitions do not match up, supporting walls vanish at different levels, foundations are missing or inadequate, structural systems have been originally designed, constructed or so modified as to be unsafe, building and zoning codes have been ignored—these are only a few of the hazards one encounters after opening up a building.

Expensive as they are to correct, unexpected problems should be anticipated and budgeted. We allocate a large percentage of our design fees to cope with the expected unexpected.

David M. Hart, AIA  
McGinley Hart & Associates  
Boston, Mass.

## Stairs by Escher

### To the Editor:

As a finish carpentry contractor, I enjoyed the October issue of *New England Builder*. I especially liked the graphic illustration on page 21, "Mastering Drywall." I can understand how easy it is to bend drywall into a curved stairwell. The tricky part is to build the stairs right-side up!

Keep up the stimulating artwork.

Robert F. McNulty Jr.  
President  
Finish Lines  
Brewster, Mass.

*We disagree. Building the stairs upside down is the tricky part.—Ed.*