EDITORIAL

Why Can't I Find a Good Contractor?

I just got off the phone with a journalist, who called to ask me (1) why so many people have awful experiences with building and remodeling contractors and (2) what I felt should be done to remedy this problem. She's writing an article for the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine,* which is seen by over 800,000 people each week. She thinks the story will be widely read and appreciated because "nearly everyone I talk to has a horror story of some kind with a contractor."

She was prompted to write the article, she said, by a bad experience she had (and is still having) with a kitchen addition. Among other things, she said, the remodeling contractor installed the roof flashings all wrong and tried his own hand at plastering, which apparently was not his forte. Furthermore, the fellow refused to make things right when asked, and a full-blown dispute is now in motion. She did admit to seeing a couple of "red-flags" early in the process: He was the low bidder of six by a large margin, and said he could get the work done in an impossibly short period of time. But she was in no rush, she said, to get it completed, And as for the price, she said, "that was his problem." (Maybe he was willing to take a loss, she thought, to get this fancy job in his portfolio.)

The journalist found the contractor by referral from a friend, who apparently had had better luck with him. Other friends of hers, however, including architects and even builders, have assured her that bad experiences with the trades are the norm. In fact, she said, in Massachusetts, consumer complaints about building contractors rank second, right in between complaints about new car dealers and used car dealers—not exactly an enviable position.

So I ask myself and all of you: Is it true that most contractors are bums who can't be trusted to show up and do a good job? And if it is true, what are we going to do about it?

Part of the problem, I told her, is that she went with a bid she recognized as too good to be true. "Do you go with the low bidder for a doctor, lawyer, or accountant?" I asked. An unrealistically low bid, I told her, is generally a good indicator of limited experience—and business skills. By going to the low bidder, consumers hurt both themselves, and the legitimate contractors who have to cover the real costs of business administration and skilled labor.

But a larger problem exists, I admitted. It is a loss of both the skills and values—the pride in one's work—that: we associate with old-fashioned craftmanship. This loss is real and in no way limited to the construction trades. But the trades clearly bear some responsibility for the problem. They let go of the apprenticeship system and have yet to fill in the gap with any meaningful training programs.

Most building contractors, I assured her, want to do a good job, but must work hard to recruit and train good people—and must pay them well. A small minority are either incompetent or sleazy, or both, and the industry and consumers should work together to put them out of business.

Despite this reality, the perception exists that contractors are a lot not to be trusted. And the perception counts. Consumer legislation aimed at contractors has been passed in Maine and New York, and is being reintroduced in Massachusetts. In most cases, these laws will be biased against the builder. What are you as contractors to do?

As individuals, the bad reputation of others can be good news to you. If you aggressively market quality, and educate consumers as to why it costs more and why it's worth it, you'll leave the low bidder out in the cold. You'll have plenty of work of the type you want, and waste less time giving estimates to window shoppers and bargain hunters.

As an industry, we must move to establish quality standards, third-party certification programs, credible warranty programs, and, in some cases, licensing. Professions establish standards of behavior and performance and make efforts to keep individual members in line. Only by acting like a profession will remodelers and builders ever be perceived as one. Furthermore, it you don't regulate yourselves, the state legislatures will do it for you. —*Steven Bliss, Editor*

Letters

Maine Law, Big Pain

To the Editor:

The first thing I would like to say is how much I enjoy your journal and look forward to receiving it every month.

I think that the law regarding contracts that you touched on briefly a month or so ago *[NEB* 5/88] is a great law to protect the public from door-to-door "widow swindlers" hut what a pain it is for the legit time and materials builder. Our public servants must have all watched the movie "Tin Men" together and then written this law.

Richard B. Chase
Deer Isle, Maine

Fuzzy Thinking About Waste Hazards

To the Editor:

Walter Jowers' response *(NEB,* 7/88) to Paul Gallant's letter regarding the disposal of the waste from masonry cleaning is endemic of the "fuzzy thinking" that has led to such environmental problems as Love Canal; I could not let it pass without comment.

To suggest, as Jowers does, that strong chemicals are less serious when diluted misses the point—they are not removed from the environment but will accumulate if not taken out of the system through special handling. If the masonry cleaning chemicals are potent enough to require a user to wear protective gear and practice careful handling during application, then that care does not stop when the wall is rinsed; there is more to he protected than just the mechanic, and all of us have an obligation to protect our environment.

Methylene chloride, which is commonly found in paint stripper, is hardly a "straightforward detergent, or acid or alkaline solution," as described by Jowers, and should be treated as a substance that is potentially dangerous to both the mechanic and the environment. It is dangerous as it comes from the can in pure form as well as after it has done its work and is contaminated with paint—paint which, if the house is relatively old, is likely to contain large quantities of lead. If this "soup" is blithely rinsed down the storm sewer it eventually enters the drinking water supply. A more responsible approach would be to create a system to contain the liquid, place it in drums, and turn it over to a hazardous waste hauler for proper disposal.

My advice to any contractor using possibly harmful chemicals would be to use one's common sense—if the substance is packaged with cautionary labels I would find out how the law says it is to be handled. I have found the EPA helpful in such matters and the time spent in research will be a small price to pay if it prevents more expensive losses.

Jowers is correct in reminding us that there are other dangerous substances surrounding us, many of them more serious than masonry cleaning chemicals. But what does that have to do with a stripping contractor being asked to practice good citizenship by safeguarding the common good? In matters of environmental protection the "you can't see it from my house" line of thinking is just plain irresponsible.

Greg Moore
Restoration Carpentry
Philadelphia, Pa.

To the Editor:

I am a new subscriber to *NEB* and am surprised at Walter Jowers' response to Paul Gallant's question: "Where do the chemicals go?"

His attitude towards the problem of hazardous wastes in the environment, or what constitutes hazardous waste came off as a real lack of concern. How dilute do water-blasted chemicals have to be to be safe? And because these chemicals don't hurt as much as acid rain or automobile pollutants is it any more right to dump them in the ground? It's time to change our thinking from "a little bit more doesn't hurt" or "the people down the road are doing something worse." When we educate ourselves in safer ways of doing things and spend some time educating others, we might just turn the trend around.

Ray Matteau
Westport, N.Y.

Misleading Statements About Fiberglass Hazards

To the Editor:

I read with interest your article entitled "Fiberglass, Mineral Wool and Your Heath" (April 1988) and offer my compliments on your efforts in dealing with this complex subject in a comprehensive fashion. However, as can happen in treating a multi-faceted subject of this kind, the story included some factual errors and misleading statements which I'd like to clarify.

As stated in the article, Drs. Philip Enterline and Gary Marsh of the University of Pittsburgh examined the number and causes of death among nearly 17,000 workers employed in 11 fiberglass plants and six mineral-wool plants between 1945 and 1963. Some of the workers were employed for as little as one year. Others were employed for as long as 40 years.

In their first report, at a WHO conference in Copenhagen in 1982, interline and Marsh reported no statistically significant increase in respiratory cancer among workers who

had died through 1977.

At a follow-up conference in Copenhagen in 1986, Enterline and Marsh gave a *preliminary* report on the lumbers and causes of death among he same group of workers, including deaths through 1982. This time, they observed a statistically significant increase of both malignant and non-malignant lung disease among fiberglass workers first employed 30 or more years ago when compared to the general U.S. population. They also reported a statistically significant increase in malignant respiratory disease among mineral-wool workers first employed more than 20 years ago, based on comparisons to national lung-cancer rates.

In June 1987, at a WHO/IARC symposium in Lyons, France, Interline and Marsh prepared an update of their study, this time comparing lung-cancer deaths among workers to mortality statistics in the communities where the plants are located. The researchers reported that fiberglass workers did not have statistically higher rates of lung-cancer deaths as compared to local populations. Lung-cancer death rates for mineral-wool workers, while lower, were still statistically significant when compared to local populations. Researchers indicated, however, that other factors may have contributed to the excess as there was conflicting data linking the amount of exposure to mineral-wool fiber and incidence of disease.

Contrary to the statement in your article, the European study presented at the 1986 WHO conference did not support the preliminary findings of the U.S. study. While the Canadian study did indicate an increased risk of lung cancer among fiberglass workers, many researchers have discounted the significance of the study's findings because of the relative small size of the group of workers studied.

The European study, using local rates for comparison, did not indicate any statistically significant finding among the fiberglass workers. The authors of the European study reported an excess of lung cancer among rock-wool/slag-wool workers. But, in that there was no relationship between intensity and duration of exposure to the fibers and disease among the workers, the study indicated that other factors may have contributed to the elevated occurrence.

In terms of animal research, it's important to note that the Stanton study to which you referred examined the effects of *surgically implanting* large doses of fibers into the tissue around the lungs of laboratory animals. Stanton, himself, cautioned against extrapolating his results to man, because the study did not simulate natural exposure conditions in humans, which would be through inhalation.

It is also important for you to know that, while the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health/ Batelle study reported "a significant increase in leukemia in laboratory rats exposed to airborne glass fibers," the animals used were of the Fischer 344 strain—a type prone to spontaneous development ofeukemia. For this reason, most scientists do not consider this finding of importance in relation to the fiberglass exposure.

We commend your staff on its extensive research effort, and hope hat TIMA and recognized publications such as yours can foster an open and informed dialogue on this important issue.

Frank Rauscher
Thermal Insulation
Manufacturers Assoc.
Littleton, Colo.

Waterfront Details Disputed

To the Editor

I recently placed a deposit on a waterfront (Hudson River) condominium. As a builder I disagree with the floor system as built, in the portion over the river (see accompanying sketch). My objections are as follows:

A) That the wood sleepers resting directly on the pre-stressed concrete slabs should have been of treated lumber.

B) That a moisture barrier should have been placed over the pre-stressed plank since on frequent occasions the river water beats against the underside of the pre-stressed concrete plank.

C) In my unit this condition exists over an area of approximately 500 square feet. The developer provided (as an afterthought) two tents (6x6-inches each) at opposite ends of the space. Although these vents, during inter months, provide enormous draft through parts of the space, I believe that during the warm periods the same ventilation will he inadequate to provide a low-moisture environment. When I removed one of the sub-floor plywood sheets, I noted that the spancrete was damp to the touch. Air movement was restricted due to HVAC ducts and headers at beam direction changes.

D) Ducts for the forced air HVAC system rest directly on the sleepers and in some cases, on the pre-stressed concrete slab. These ducts are galvanized metal, not insulated and are below the insulation.

There are other units that have the same floor construction but are over an open air parking area. During this past winter they experienced extreme problems maintaining temperature within.

The developer's representatives have responded to my criticism by stating that the space is considered a "dry area," so therefore treated lumber was not used. While this may be true in the portion over the parking areas, it does not seem appropriate in the river portion. Certainly, in both cases, the lack of insulated duct work is incorrect, and the vents provided are inadequate to prevent moisture damage to the untreated lumber.

I would appreciate an opinion from your staff.

Vincent D'Angelo
Nanuet, N.Y.

Author William Lotz responds:

Your condo is a disaster waiting to happen!

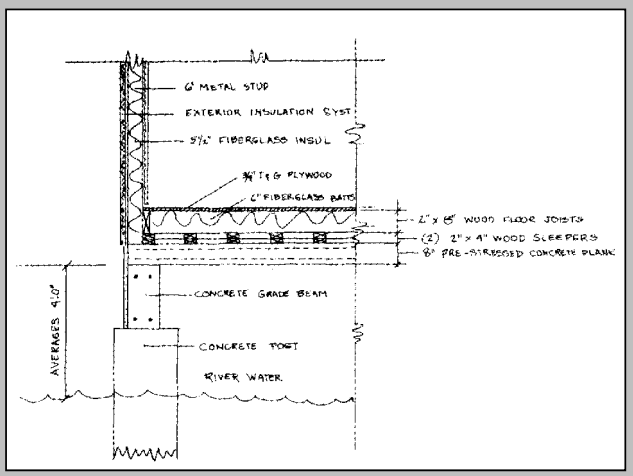
A) Yes, the wood sleepers should have been treated.

B) Yes, a water barrier should have been placed over the pre-stressed planks.

C) The vents can negate the effectiveness of the fiberglass batts.

D) The ducts should have been well insulated.

I suggest you get your deposit back and find something built on solid ground!



A Taxing Experience

To the Editor:

In reference to the advice in "Tax Talk" (8/88): I deducted depreciation for 20 percent of my home for my office, and then was dismayed to learn that 20 percent of the profit on the sale of my home was then classified as income in the year of the sale of the home! So, now I pay rent from the company to myself for the office space, to cover the amount I had been claiming as depreciation.

Andrew M. Shapiro
Montpelier, Vt.

Hire an Architectural Student

To the Editor:

As an architectural designer I was interested in the negative comments about architects made by Mark Willms in the February issue. His frustrations are understandable, particularly concerning the lack of practical building expertise of many architects coming from academic institutions.

I am writing to urge contractors to hire recent architectural graduates or students during summers and semesters off. Most architects do recognize the value of construction experience, but many, especially women, have found it difficult to get hired. Put a notice in job banks that all schools have. Consider it a small but constructive step toward closing the gap that exists between the design and building ends of the industry.

Collie Traynor
Cambridge, Mass.

Ice-Dam Advice Questioned

To the Editor:

In regards to Henri de Marne's article on ice dams in the May 1988 issue, he implied that heat tapes are of no use in removing ice-dam water from the roof, and also that the combination of soffit and gable vents can not adequately ventilate an attic.

Both of these statements are ludicrous and only make one wonder about the rest of his story.

I inspect approximately 800 roofs and attics a year. How could I tell a great number of my clients that these systems won't work, when they do?

Bob Haarde
Sparta, N.J.

Author Henri De Marne responds:

Electric roof cables, and a combination of soffit and gable vents may very well work to control leakage from ice dams in New Jersey. And I am sure that they would also work without fail in Florida. But I, too, inspect many roofs in the course of a year (as a home inspector, consultant, and forensic expert) and can assure Mr. Haarde that they do not work reliably in cold climates where heavy snowfall accumulates on roofs throughout the winter. My photos shown in the article should have convinced Mr. Haarde that we are dealing with different conditions. The Vermont climate is over 8,000 heating degree days, as opposed to New Jersey with a range of 4,600 to 5,600.

Moreover, electric cables can be dangerous to use. They can cause fires when their insulation degenerates from age and weather exposure or is damaged by people attempting to remove ice that forms around them.

A thorough study of attic ventilation, may convince Mr. Haarde that, in the average attic of post-WWII houses (and particularly in attics with retrofitted insulation) gable vents are not sufficient to prevent condensation and frosting. These problems may last all winter long in cold climates and even in moderate climates. As a starter I recommend Roof-Snow Behavior and Ice-Dam Prevention in Residential Housing *by Howard L. Grange and Lewis T. Hendricks of the Agricultural Extension Service of the University of Minnesota.*

In conclusion, Mr. Haarde should not feel compelled to tell his clients that these systems don't work, if they do in his area. In my own work, I let common sense guide my comments. I certainly would not criticize a client's use of gable vents until I had gotten a good look at the attic to determine whether there were signs of problems.

Although it's a long way off, perhaps Mr. Haarde should consider taking a tax-deductible trip in late February or March to Vermont to study for himself the roof problems. all of us residing in cold climates, from the Sierras to Maine, experience and cope with.

Window Films Not Sound Insulation

To the Editor:

I have a comment on the window article in the August issue. According to the "Window Shopping" sidebar, a window with a suspended heat mirror film was selected partly due to sound insulating quality of the film. I am very skeptical of the accoustical

performance benefit of such a film. I assume these films are very thin with negligible mass and negligible sound isolation.

On the other hand, some polyvinyl butyl manufacturers, e.g. Monsanto, do manufacture laminated glass interlayers which provide some thermal benefits as well as damping which increases the sound isolation performance of glass. More information can be obtained from Randolph Wright, Monsanto (800/325-4330) who is the Saflex interlayer marketing director.

Timothy J. Foulkes
Cavanaugh Tocci Associates
Sudbury, Mass.

Foam Form Tip

To the Editor:

The article by Alex Wilson about polystyrene forms for concrete (July, 88) was excellent. I'd like to add one point: When filling blocks of Crete Core, it is safer to fill 32 inches at a pass and make three passes around the wall instead of 48 inches each pass. Filling is easiest from a concrete pump.

One of the biggest selling points of Crete Core blocks is that they can be used successfully by first-time foundation builders.

Barney Thomas
Barney Thomas Building Co.
Guilford, Conn.

Energy Glossary Useful

To the Editor:

I know that "The Energy Bestiary & Glossary" put together by the *NEB* staff will be very useful to me in the future. When meeting with a client or consulting I try to use as many of these terms as possible. Now I'll be sure not to forget any.

Two definitions, however, are missing:

Foamed In-Place: A gooey and sticky form of punishment meted out to architects and engineers who advocate ridiculously complicated schemes for insulating and ventilating walls and roofs.

Crackage: The state of mind of homeowners when they find out—at their own expense, of course—that the wood framing of their home has greater R-value than the insulation.

Please be sure to periodically update the Glossary so that we novices can understand the experts.

Joel A. Schwartz
Foam-Tech, Inc.
North Thetford, Vt.

Keep 'em coming... We welcome letters, but they must be signed and include the writer's address. The *Journal of Light Construction* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and clarity. Mail letters to *The Journal,* P.O. Box 5059, Burlington, Vt 05402.