Letters

In Defense of Swedish Builders

To the Editor:

Jon Slote's article in your August issue ("Swedes Seek Joint Venture," Eight-Penny News) clearly brings up the main problems with introducing a new technology from one country to another – communication. The seminar in Cambridge, Mass., referred to in the article, was only one step of many in the process of transferring the Swedish factory-crafted housing technology to the U.S.

There is nothing unique with the Swedish factory-crafted house, as was pointed out at this seminar. The main secret to its success is the system approach to housing and effective management of the building process.

A Swedish factory-crafted house can be designed to meet any regional architectural taste, local building codes, and varied lifestyles. Most houses being built today in the U.S., using the Swedish factory-crafted house system, are beautiful American designed houses using Swedish and American components. These houses are definitely not shaped like boxes with small windows, as some critics contend. Some Swedish components, like age-resistant vapor barriers and rubber gaskets, have to be used in order not to break the total system.

Yes, there have been problems with assembling the houses and keeping the quality of the original product. The main reason for this has been human error. The American carpenters have been hesitant to change the way they previously had been doing things, which is understandable.

The Swedish factory—crafted house building process, implemented in the U.S., could reduce the cost of low-rise residential construction. When built to prevailing American standards, construction costs for a factory-crafted house are 20% to 50% lower (according to the report "When the Best Cost Less" by Paul Kando, Center for the House, Washington, D.C., 1988). One of the main reasons for this is 30% to 50% fewer labor hours. Even when built to more demanding Swedish standards, a factory crafted house costs less to build than a similar, conventional stick-built house.

In short, the Swedish factory-crafted housing system offers flexibility in design, high quality energy-efficient construction, short building time, and low building and maintenance costs.

Orjan Isacson, vice president
Swedish Building Systems & Components Office
Swedish Trade Council USA
Chicago, Ill.

Bricks Don't Burn

To the Editor:

I read the article "Party Wall Options" by Rick Maranhas (JLC, 10/89) with great apprehension.

In one part of Mr. Maranhas' article, he illustrated three firewalls built with combustible materials without even mentioning a noncombustible wall of concrete masonry.

However, in the discussion of a multi-tenant housing project, he states that the units built with masonry firewalls sold before the units with gypsum firewalls, prompting the builders to switch to masonry firewalls in the last buildings. It is a good thing that his customers know the value of fire safety over low-cost construction.

The list of advantages in using concrete masonry for multi-tenant buildings is a long one:

1. Concrete masonry is noncombustible. An 8x8x16 inch concrete block has a fire rating of 1.5 hours while the same size block in a lightweight aggregate has a 2-hour fire rating. It also will not disintegrate when hit by a stream of water during a fire, thereby allowing reconstruction of the damaged unit at a lower cost, and also protecting neighboring units.
2. Concrete masonry has very good sound deadening properties, which is a high priority in multi-tenant buildings.
3. Concrete masonry has very little, if any maintenance. It will not rot, rust, or deteriorate and you do not have to paint it every couple years.

The list could go on.

Lawrence B. Woolson, Jr.
Wiggins Masonry Products
Springfield, VT

Why the "Mac" Attack?

To the Editor:

You do your readers a disservice by employing a computer columnist with a bias against Macintosh computers. The recent reader's question about Macintosh-based accounting (State of the Art Contractor, 10/89) was greeted with a snuffle-harumph and the snide advice to "give the Macs to your kids." In case Morris Carey hasn't heard, the Macintosh is a very capable business computer – as I am sure the reader already knows. Sure, there aren't as many industry specific (vertical market) software programs available for the Mac. But the ones that are available are generally as powerful as PC programs and are always much easier to use than their IBM compatible equivalents. Mr. Carey seems to be caught up in the myth that computers and software have to be difficult to use to be any good.

But enough of that. My advice to Nancy O. would be to begin by evaluating accounting programs that do not say "construction" on the box. Accrual accounting is, after all, what almost everyone does with an accounting program and many off-the-shelf programs come with a job costing module. The few additional construction-specific features you get from a big bucks programs can easily be made up for by the lower initial cost, larger and more stable company, and more accessible (often local) technical support available with a more widely distributed software package.

A good bet for simply a good balance sheet and income statement is "AccPac Bedford Simply Accounting" ($350). This program was designed for the construction industry, but is now marketed to many different businesses. "Simply Accounting" began life on the PC and was completely redesigned for the Macintosh. It is complete and includes General Ledger, Account Payable, and Receivable, Job Cost, and Payroll. If you plan to have a consultant or accountant help you analyze the information you gather, this may be all the accounting you need. It includes an excellent accounting tutorial and, if nothing else, evaluating it will help make you knowledgeable consumer when you invest in another "high-end" system.

As far as high-end systems on the Mac go, my current favorite is "Great Plains," which goes for $3,000 or more. It is easy to use, very powerful and flexible, and comes with exceptional user support (no one will snicker when you call and admit to not quite understanding how retained earnings work).

Above all, my advice to Nancy O. is not to let some "expert" persuade her to junk efficient and effective business tools, her Macintoshes. Sure, she should consider expensive PC programs, but not until she has exhausted all of the possible Macintosh options. Coming from the joys of a Macintosh, she has no idea how difficult a PC system can be.

Guy S, Hermann
Clear Thinking
Mystic, Conn.

Morris Carey Responds:

Guy Hermann's comments are well taken. But unfortunately, we who struggle in construction need programs that are as construction specific as the business we do. Not that some generic programs won't work, because several will. But, the major difference between Apple and IBM in the construction software category is truly variety of choice.

What really separates contractors from other businesses is estimating, and PC DOS is the software of choice in this category by an overwhelming margin. With this in mind I like to think that end users will consider all their construction software needs before deciding upon which machine to use.

Both software and hardware options are available that will allow PC DOS programs to run on a Macintosh. The drawback here is that the end user winds up working with two different operating environments or an additional software program to manage, sometimes confusing an already confusing proposition.

I made a concerted effort in 1987 to get the folks at Apple to work more closely with folks in our industry in an effort to make more construction software available. It's a slow process.

Loose Ends Department

Many readers have requested information about a book mentioned in Harris Hyman's "Secrets of Structural Engineering," (JLC, 4/89). The book, Structures: Or Why Things Don't Fall Down *by J.E. Gordon, is published by Da Capo Press (a subsidiary of Plenum Publishers). It is available through the Quality Paperback (QPS, Series (ISBN Q-306-80151-5). For information, call QPS at 800/321-0050.*

Another much requested item is the address for the Center for Maximum Building Potential (see JLC Backfill, 8/89). You can contact them at Max Pot, 8604 FM 969, Austin, TX 78724; 512/926-4418. –The Editors