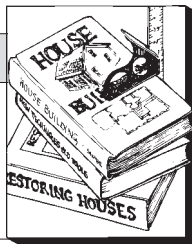


## Help for Developers

by Paul Hanke

**Developing Difficult Sites** by Donald Brandes, Jr. and J. Michael Luzier (Homebuilder Press, 1991; 800/223-2665). 92 pages. Paperback, 8 1/2 x 11. \$25.



Tough sites are a contemporary fact of life. But such sites become a problem only when surprises arise that require costly remedies. In *Developing Difficult Sites*, landscape architect Donald Brandes and co-author Michael Luzier, director of NAHB's Environmental Regulations Department, argue that if you don't want problems down the road, do your homework before you even purchase a piece of land. This means knowing your objectives, studying the market, comparing alternative sites, and preparing a preliminary plan. And it means assembling a team, including a surveyor, landscape planner, civil engineer, and architect, to aid you in the process. To the authors, these up-front expenses are a good investment, even if you discover it won't pay to go ahead with the proposed project. At its best, the process will yield a plan that works with, not against, the nature of the site, and one that increases profits and moves smoothly past the planning commission.

Can this slim volume do all that for you? Not really, but it will open your eyes to the many components that must be dealt with in site development, and to the many strategies for solving common problems and dealing with officialdom.

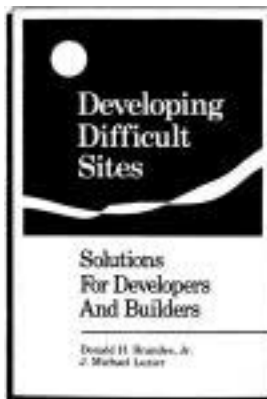
To succeed, say the authors, you need to identify the primary constraints that can affect the profitability of your project and take positive steps toward dealing with them. Perhaps the most critical factor is getting permitted, and a whole chapter is devoted to this crucial area. It includes checklists and a discussion of the subjects you must be knowledgeable about — local comprehensive plans; zoning, subdivision, and infrastructure regulations; and environmental protection rules.

The rest of the book focuses on practical approaches to specific problems. You'll learn why berms have an advantage over fences for noise control, and why sensitivity to the concerns of neighbors is preferable to treating them like nuisances. You'll discover when single-loaded roads make sense for steep sites, how to turn poor drainage into an amenity, and how saving trees saves money

and adds value to the property.

Finally, you'll see the authors' principles applied to real-world situations in three case studies.

It's an easy read, with good graphics and worthwhile advice — I'd give it an "8" as an entry-level reference. And despite the fact that it seems to be geared more toward large developers than small builders, I found it to be helpful as a tool for thinking through the general issues involved in a single lot.



### On The Fence

**Fences & Retaining Walls** by William McElroy (Craftsman Book Co., 1990; 800/829-8123). 389 pages. Paperback, 8 1/2 x 11. \$23.25.

I am constantly amazed by the increasing number of trades that require licensing. These days, some guardians of public health and safety, or perhaps consumer activists or — dare I say? — the fence contractors lobby, feel we must pass an exam in order to undertake such a seemingly innocuous job as building a fence. It is for the apprentice preparing to leap this hurdle that William McElroy has written *Fences & Retaining Walls*.

Maybe I am getting harder to please, but I found this book disappointing, although not completely without value. First of all, the title and cover illustrations lead the reader to expect guidance on design and construction. I found, instead, an emphasis on the business of fence contracting. To be sure, the book deals with the technical and artistic aspects of fences and retaining walls, but Mr. McElroy's approach generally left me cold. One particular example, meant to illustrate the use of concrete block and corrugated plastic for "function and beauty," prompted my 11-year-old son to say it looked like "a prison wall."

So much for beauty, but suppose you simply want to build fences that are sturdy and functional, leaving the looks to others? Much of *Fences & Retaining Walls* is devoted to this subject, including wood, chain link, and wire fences, block and brick

walls, gates, and even plumbing and electricity, in case you want to add a spigot or some lighting to your creation. The material provides a good overview of the many types of fences available and their applications, but I wouldn't rely on this book alone to turn me into a fence builder. Some of the author's advice is downright dangerous, such as when he suggests running electrical wire up a dado in a fence post, and then filling the groove with putty and painting the post.

Other ideas are simply uninformed or impractical. For instance, the author says he'd "love to see" stainless-steel nails; as far as I know, they're readily available. And his technique for building a reinforced block wall has you lift 30- to 40-pound units 6 feet into the air and gently lower them over vertical rebar onto the courses below. This may be all right for Arnold Schwarzenegger-types, but I wonder if Mr. McElroy has actually tried it. For technical counsel, I prefer sources such as the Portland Cement Association pamphlet, "Small Retaining Walls," or Sunset's *Fences & Gates* to Mr. McElroy's much longer treatment of the subject.

I found the material on running a business better than the how-to portions of the book. I even thought the chapter on estimating was pretty informative for the beginning contractor. If you're looking for a book on becoming a fence contractor, *Fences & Retaining Walls* tries to be comprehensive, but falls short on the nitty-gritty of actual construction. Use it to explore a specialty career, but don't expect too much for your money. ■

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### Footnotes

If you choose to build with the labor-intensive, rammed-earth method, David Easton's 115-page book, *Dwelling on Earth: A Manual for the Professional Application of Earthbuilding Techniques* (Rammed Earth Works, 1350 Elm St., Napa, CA 94559; 707/224-2532), is clearly the bible. Easton is an experienced builder who carefully considers site access, scheduling, and working with subs. He includes practical descriptions of the building process, from soil selection, stabilization, and compaction to window and door details and techniques for accommodating mechanicals in solid walls.

In the \$25 manual, Easton convincingly argues for the durability of rammed-earth houses in any climate. However, as long as labor is the most expensive part of constructing rammed-earth houses, it is unlikely that they will become the "New American Bungalow," as Easton envisions, than that they will remain on the fringes.

— Clayton DeKorne