

Framing California Style

by Carl Hagstrom



Rough Framing Carpentry by Mark Currie (Craftsman Books, 1993; 800/829-8123). Softcover, 8½x11, 299 pages. \$26.50.

Mark Currie's *Rough Framing Carpentry* should come with a warning printed in bold letters on the cover: *Warning! Fasten seatbelt before reading.* This nonsense book, which could be subtitled "production framing at warp speed," sends a hard-edged message to those who would make their living as framers: Technique is governed by speed.

While most carpentry books have a couple of chapters on rough framing, Currie has produced nearly 300 pages on the subject. To give you an idea of the level of detail in this book, two full chapters are devoted solely to sheathing subfloors and roofs. The text is backed up with excellent black-and-white photos of real-world framing events, not the staged shots often found in generic carpentry manuals.

Those who live east of the Mississippi (myself included) will quickly realize that this book is specifically Pacific. This isn't a fault, but there are some West Coast techniques that might not work as well in the east. Currie writes about layout men, for example, snapping lines ahead of the framing crew. That could be a washout in my area in the spring and fall rainy seasons. But regional differences won't prevent eastern carpenters from finding this book as valuable as their western counterparts.

After a brief discussion of tools and materials, *Rough Framing* starts in with layout and doesn't let up till the roof is sheathed. The fast pace will leave some novices behind, but veteran carpenters

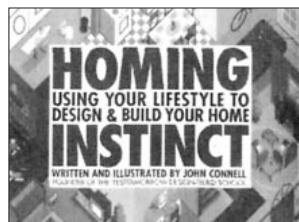
will appreciate the wealth of information, especially those who have ploughed through entire carpentry texts only to gain a handful of useful tips.

When it comes to production technique, it's the small things that count. Currie contends, for example, that "there is rarely an excuse to take out your tape when building walls," and follows through on this claim with photos and text that describe how to crosscut plates, blocks, and trimmers accurately by eye. Purists may have a hard time with this kind of advice, but piece workers will recognize the value of the increased speed.

Safety engineers, on the other hand, will wince at almost every photo in the book. Sneaker-shod carpenters abound, and it would be easier to find Waldo than anyone wearing safety glasses. There are also a couple of shots of a carpenter hanging off the edge of the building cutting rafter tails. It made me shudder — and wonder why the tails weren't cut on the ground. And I still haven't figured out why anyone would carry an unsheathed framing hatchet in their hammer holster 20 feet above the deck. But like it or not, this is often the true picture found on site. To his credit, Currie notes the importance of working safely, and urges readers to establish practices they feel comfortable with.

The book stumbles a bit in the chapter on stairs, in which Currie tries to cover too much ground in too short a space. He also confuses the reader by using the term "tread" to describe both the unit run of a stair as well as the finished tread width.

But there is not much fault to find with *Rough Framing Carpentry*. If you think you know it all, this book can still teach you something new. If you know you know it all, read it anyway. It's worth it just to see the photos of a carpenter dodging the backswing of his partner's framing hatchet.



Homing Instinct by John Connell (Warner Books, 1993; 800/759-0190). Hardcover, 11x8½, 404 pages. \$35.

When I first saw this book, I must admit I was skeptical. Here was a book written by an architect that claimed to show nonbuilders how to design and build their own home. I've spent my entire adult life learning how to design and build houses, and I've also had the dubious honor of being called in to complete a few owner-built homes as well. So it was with raised eyebrow that I zeroed in on *Homing Instinct*.

John Connell is the founder of the Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Warren, Vt., and it shows. He writes in the comfortable, conversational manner of someone who's spent some time teaching. Connell's content is sometimes suspect, but his delivery seldom falters.

Design/builders will be attracted to the early chapters on conceptual design and vernacular architecture. These chapters will help readers increase their design vocabulary and refine the dialogue that occurs during the planning process with clients. The common-sense design philosophy will also help when you're wrestling with budget constraints. Connell also provides a questionnaire that quizzes potential homeowners on their design preferences. This could be useful when trying to focus a client's attention during the early stages of the design process.

Connell presents the chapters on methods and materials in a logical progression, but I often thought he squeezed too much information into too small a space. And the self-help emphasis sometimes gives short shrift to builders. Towards the end of the section on masonry, for example, Connell discounts the skill required to lay concrete block. He writes, "All of the foregoing procedures are easily executed after a little practice, and should be considered part of the design/builder's palette of options." I was trained as a mason and speak from experience when I say that quality masonry requires more than "a little practice."

I had mixed feelings after reading *Homing Instinct*. Three reader profiles came to mind: The appreciative design/builder, the seething production builder, and the gushing owner/builder. Connell does builders an injustice by trivializing the trades and discounting the value of experience. But he also does builders a service by providing a good source for design techniques and designer-client interaction. If design plays any part in your business, add this book to your library.

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Simplified Site Engineering, 2nd edition by James Ambrose, John MacQuire, and the late Harry Parker (Wiley, 1992; 800/225-5945). Hardcover, 5 1/2x8 1/2, 174 pages. \$49.95.

The *Simplified* book series, begun by Harry Parker and ably continued by James Ambrose of the University of Southern California, is a first-rate collection of semi-technical presentations on a wide range of subjects relating to building and construction. The present volume, *Simplified Site Engineering*, is an update of the

original 1954 edition, bringing it into the age of contemporary surveying technology and pocket calculators. It is one of three related titles (the other two are *Simplified Design of Building Foundations* and *Simplified Site Design*) with overlapping content, each of which has its own focus. *Site Engineering* concentrates on the fields of civil engineering and surveying, aiming at a readership of architects, landscape architects, builders, engineers, and technicians. It is especially geared to those who don't get much hands-on experience but who need a ready reference occasionally.

The book begins with a refresher course on the Pythagorean Theorem, trig functions, the Law of Sines, and formulas for planar and volumetric computation. Succeeding chapters include worked examples of these fundamental math skills as applied to practical applications. Topics include measuring distances and angles, plotting curves and contours, figuring cut and fill, establishing grades, and siting buildings. The authors explain how to plot data onto maps and contour drawings, and guide the reader through the basics of numerous common sitework problems, such as stabilizing slopes and controlling water. This information is ably presented in lucid language and with adequate graphics. An appendix offers detail on soil classification, behaviors, and modification.

My only reservation about this otherwise outstanding work is that the answers to the sample problems are not provided in most of the chapters. And the authors' emphasis on "laborious hand calculations" is probably responsible for their omitting any discussion of how to run the numbers on a calculator. The conviction that readers should learn the hard way may help readers grasp the underlying principles, but it is cumbersome for those who just want to crunch numbers. Still, *Simplified Site Engineering* will be useful in any builder's office. ■

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