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BUILDERS EXPLORE CYBERSPACE

by Al Bredenberg

These days, it's hard to open a newspaper or magazine without seeing a new story about the wonders of the "information superhighway," a term that loosely defines the vast array of computer networks that connect people and information worldwide. Millions of people have flocked to commercial online services and the public-access Internet to join in online discussion groups, search for educational or business resources, download software, join in interactive games, or simply surf around looking for "cool stuff."

But what about the construction world? Can the new electronic wonderland offer anything to builders,

remodelers, tradespeople, and designers?

Well, if you're looking for help with computer software, the online world is a good place to start. Advice from users and technical support from suppliers is readily available online for many business management and design programs.

"I go into the CompuServe Caddvender forum a lot," says Michael Halpern, an Atlanta home builder and designer, "since the new CAD program I have switched to has a section there. Answers to my questions as I struggled to master this program were very helpful."

The online world also offers an opportunity to meet and



greet other construction professionals on computer chat lines, bulletin boards, and forums. "It beats working on the stuff I really hate to do: the book-work!" says contractor Ronald Cameron. "Where else can I B.S. with people who aren't competitors in my town?" adds builder Dale Booth.

Such online socializing has entertainment value, but experienced users say very little construction-related business happens online. Instead, the online world can be a source of wasted time, frustration, and disappointment. Joining the fun costs money and takes

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Bringing Home the Green

Environmental builders are gaining support from programs that certify resource-efficient methods

A majority of Americans describe themselves as environmentalists, but will they back up their opinions with their dollars? While some builders have adopted new "sustainable" technologies as a way to attract customers, many more builders still doubt that home buyers will pay for the green extras.

Communities and utility companies, however, stand to gain from the spread of green

construction techniques. New housing puts a strain on sewer and water facilities, municipal dumps, and power plants. Resource-conserving designs can lessen those loads. That's why city- and utility-sponsored "green builder" certification programs are springing up to help contractors build and market resource-efficient homes.

Instead of charging

builders impact fees to pay for the increased demand on community services, these programs reward builders for reducing the impacts. To offset added construction costs, the programs often provide rebates and financing to buyers, and help builders to market the green houses. Judging from the customer response, green marketing can work.

It's big in Texas. When the City of Austin, Texas, introduced its Green Builder Program in 1992 as an extension of its Energy Star rating system for new homes, the new program caught on fast. "There was a pent-up demand for building practices that contribute to a healthy

environment," says program manager Doug Seiter.

The Green Builder Program now has almost 100 local members. And Seiter says his organization receives more than 50 calls a week from across the country and around the world, many from interested home buyers. One member builder turns down two custom home jobs a week because the buyers are too far from his Austin headquarters.

Four grades of green. The Austin program uses on-site inspections to verify that homes fall into one of four classes:

- "One Star" houses have water-efficient landscaping,

continued

LUMBER PRICES HEAD DOWN

Lumber prices have fallen a long way from 1993 peak levels. In May, the composite framing lumber price published by *Random Lengths*, the lumber market newsletter, was at \$327 for 1,000 board feet, down from an average of \$400 for all of 1994. This meant that a Western S-P-F stud was retailing in the Midwest for about \$1.80, *Random Lengths* reported, underselling 20-gauge nonbearing steel studs, which were priced in the \$2 to \$2.20 range.

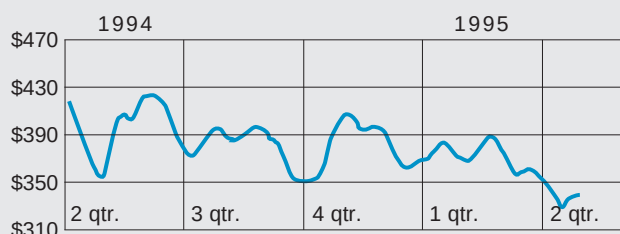
In historical perspective, current lumber prices are relatively low. Compared with the late 1970s, lumber costs today make up much less of a new home's price, and while

as a byproduct of pulp and chip operations. This surplus will continue to depress the price of sawn lumber, although some less profitable mills that are not involved in the chip market will probably close.

Meanwhile, the future supply of federal timber remains a big unknown. A federal judge has approved the Clinton administration's compromise "Option Nine" plan to resume limited logging on federal lands. Opponents still plan more legal challenges to Option Nine, but even some conservationists support moderate logging of federal land to preserve forest health and reduce fire risks. And Republicans in Congress are

Framing Lumber Prices

(per 1,000 board feet)



(Source: Random Lengths)

the square-foot cost of a new home has risen 93% since 1978, the cost of framing lumber has gone up only 70% over the same period.

Moreover, market forces in the timber industry will tend to hold lumber prices down, according to *Random Lengths*. Many large mills have lumber operations tied to chip and pulp production. In the present economic expansion, demand for paper, cardboard packaging, and other forest products is continuing to surge. Ironically, even as the demand for housing moderates, the forest products industry will continue to produce a high volume of sawn lumber

promising legislative action to allow more federal timber to be cut.

Any substantial release of federal timber could sharply lower lumber prices. However, continuing federal budget cuts may place practical limits on how much timber actually reaches the market. During the recent years of virtually no government timber sales, many of the government employees who manage the sales process have reportedly retired or quit. If selling trees from the national forests would require new government hiring and spending, the sales may not happen any time soon. □

Tax Talk

SEP-IRA: Last-Minute Shelter

by Martha Myron

If you're a self-employed sole proprietor and have filed on time for an automatic extension of the filing deadline, it's not too late for you to shelter some of 1994's income from federal taxes. Consider setting up a SEP-IRA (Simplified Employee Pension - Individual Retirement Account). Money you put into such an account as savings for retirement (as much as 13.4% of your income or \$30,000, whichever is less) is not taxable, and interest or other earnings from that account also won't be taxed until you retire and take the money out.

Using a procedure called "trustee-to-trustee transfer," you can move this investment from bank to bank or account to account and control how it is invested, as long as you keep it in the form of a SEP-IRA. However, if you withdraw and use money before age 59½, you'll usually have to pay a penalty.

The best thing about a SEP-IRA for the self-employed is that you can put the money in all at once at any time up until the due date of your tax return plus all extensions. For serious procrastinators who file for two automatic extensions, that could mean as late as October 15th. (Note, however, that any contribution you make before you file in any year counts against the previous year's taxable income, not the current year's.)

If you've already filed this year's taxes, keep this strategy in mind for any year when you'd like to shelter some income and save for the future. How much a SEP-

IRA benefits you depends on how much you make: The higher your tax bracket in any year, the more you will save. In years when you make good money, contributions to your SEP-IRA could be like an investment with an immediate 28% net return.

SEP-IRAs are simple to set up and manage, and have no IRS reporting requirements. To start one, just run to your nearest bank or brokerage house and they will give you a simple form to fill out to open your account.

If you have employees and you want to start a SEP-IRA, you have to include all employees who qualify. Any employee who is over 21, has worked for you in at least three of the last five years, and who has earned at least \$396 a year in wages must be allowed in. You must also fund each account with an equal percentage of each employee's income, including your own. Annual contributions are not mandatory, however, so you can fund the plan in good years only, if you choose.

As the employer, your contribution to a SEP-IRA is an adjustment to gross income, so it will not lower your self-employment tax. But your contribution to your employees' plans is a direct business expense, which reduces your company's taxable income dollar for dollar.

To find out if a SEP-IRA plan is right for your company, consult your accountant.

Martha Myron is a certified public accountant practicing in Concord, N.H.

STATE BY STATE

Rhode Island. Members of the Rhode Island Builders Association (RIBA) are dissatisfied with the state's Department of Environmental Management (DEM) policy for determining groundwater levels for septic applications. The *Rhode Island Builder Report* says DEM routinely changes determinations of groundwater levels submitted by professional engineers. If DEM has no consistent procedure for establishing wet-season factors, claims RIBA task force chairman Richard Johnston, the agency's case-by-case alteration of engineering reports is unlawful.

Massachusetts. In addition to causing major headaches for home sellers, new septic regs will have a big impact on building and remodeling. Under the new Title 5 of the state Environmental Code, shallower leach fields covering a broader area will be required in many cases. The result will be an increase in the lot size required for many building and remodeling projects. Builders should check out the effect of the new rules before finalizing plans.

Connecticut. The legislature is considering limiting appeals of town zoning board decisions. Under an amendment to a bill allowing towns to withhold zoning approval from applicants who owe property taxes, affordable housing projects proposed for non-residential zones could not use the state's fast-track appeals process.

American-Style Homes Held Up Well in Japan Quake

In the recent major earthquake in Kobe, Japan, most of the city's traditional Japanese-style homes built in the '40s and '50s were destroyed. But one scrap of good news has emerged from the rubble of the disaster: Single-family homes stick-framed and sheathed in the typical American fashion are reported to have held up fine.

Thousands of people were tragically buried under collapsed older homes because those buildings used traditional mortise-and-tenon framing and lacked structural sheathing. In addition, most of those homes were built with very heavy tile roofs, which the house framing could not support in the quake.

But engineers touring the damage said that demonstration homes built with Western methods have greater seismic resistance and survived the quake with only cosmetic damage.

Meanwhile, however, engineers and code officials studying the effects of last year's

Northridge, Calif., earthquake are raising questions about some wood-frame construction techniques. Writing in the International Conference of Building Officials magazine *Building Standards* (3/95), San Jose building official Andrew Adelman advised limiting the use of conventional wood-frame construction provisions in the code. Noting that

and for multistory apartment buildings."

Adelman, who is an engineer, recommends code changes that would require engineering analysis for homes that stretch the envelope of stick-built methods.

Even without specific code requirements, it's always a good idea for builders to consult an engineer about



Many older Japanese homes were destroyed in the quake, but modern buildings nearby survived intact.

many homes built today include elements like large windows, vaulted ceilings, and three-car garages, Adelman said that conventional framing is being pushed "well beyond its safe limits for large, complicated hillside homes with large openings,

unusual structural loads and connections. This is especially important when using engineered materials, such as laminated veneer lumber, glue-laminated timbers, or wood I-joists, because commonsense rules of thumb don't always hold true. □

Recycling Solutions Emerging for Drywall, Carpet

As the search for ways to recycle building materials continues, attention is turning to products like drywall and carpet.

In Tigard, Ore., John Knez, Jr., of Knez Building Materials Company, has developed a mechanized process for separating scrap drywall into its reusable components: paper and gypsum powder. Buyers for recycled paper are plentiful, but Knez has also found markets for the gypsum, which can be used for animal bedding and to manufacture new drywall.

As a building materials retailer, the Knez company offers builders the opportunity to dump their scrap at the same place where they purchase new drywall, combining the convenience of one-stop shopping with a disposal charge lower than area dumping fees.

Meanwhile, the carpet industry is taking the first steps toward reclaiming and reusing some of the 3 billion pounds of scrap carpet that go to the dump each year. DuPont Nylon Furnishings, a major manufacturer of new

carpet, has arranged for the nationwide carpet distributor MSA Industries (MSAI) to collect used carpet at 25 locations across the country. (MSAI will take old carpet only in connection with the purchase of a new DuPont carpet.)

As in the Oregon drywall recycling operation, DuPont customers get the convenience of dumping old carpet when they purchase new material, as well as a slightly reduced charge for disposal compared with landfill fees. For information, call 800/438-7668. □

Bringing Home the Green, continued

home recycling centers, high-efficiency (12 SEER minimum) hvac systems, well-sealed and balanced duct systems, recycled-content building materials, fly ash added to the concrete, and low-VOC paints.

- “Two Star” houses add a xeriscape (a landscape with plantings that don’t need

but some Green Builder members are targeting the affordable market. Austin developer Legend Communities, for instance, plans a 94-unit “Three Star” development where homes will sell for \$60,000 to \$70,000. Hatham Dawlett, Legend’s top man, says that making green affordable isn’t very complicated. The green techniques are mostly “just



Wood I-joists, fly-ash concrete blocks, and a heat-reflecting radiant barrier helped earn green points for this low-budget home in Austin, Texas.



watering), a compost system, ceiling fans, a radiant barrier plus continuous ridge and soffit vents in the attic, and shaded east and west walls.

- To be certified “Three Star,” a builder must provide a household water budget, make use of trees and bushes cut at the building site (as fence posts, firewood, or mulch), install a 14 SEER hvac system, and use passive or active solar energy.
- To gain “Four Star” status, the builder must add rainwater harvesting or graywater irrigation, minimize construction waste, and install a 16 SEER hvac system.

Green on a budget. The list may sound expensive,

commonsense building,” he says. “Most builders are already using recycled materials, whether they know it or not.”

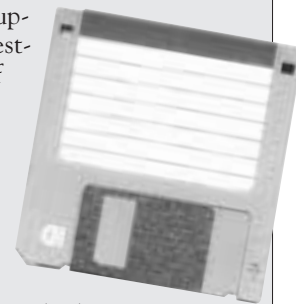
Finger-jointed studs, gypsum, engineered lumber, and many insulation products add points to a house in the Green Builder Program. These green extras add \$1,500 to \$2,000 to the cost of a 1,300-square-foot house, according to Dawlett, but Austin offers \$800 to \$1,000 in offsetting rebates. The city is also helping Dawlett’s buyers with their down payments.

For more information, contact Doug Seiter, Green Builder Program, 206 E. Ninth St., Suite 17.102, Austin, TX 78701; 512/499-7827. □

FROM WHAT WE GATHER

Basements are growing in popularity in Japan, according to an April 10 report in Tokyo’s English-language *Nikkei Weekly*. A relaxation in Construction Ministry rules has made it easier to get basements approved, the paper says, but many home buyers are still deterred by the high cost: A basement in Japan runs about 1.3 million yen per *tsubo* (the *tsubo* is a Japanese measurement roughly equal to 3.3 square meters). At current exchange rates, that’s the equivalent of about \$430 per square foot. A survey by Mitsui Homes found that many Japanese who have ordered basements plan to use them for hobbies such as karaoke or golf practice.

A new database software package, Woods of the World, from the nonprofit organization Tree Talk, lets wood buyers search for available species with the characteristics they want. The program can also provide sources of wood supply from certified sustainably harvested forests. The high-end version of the program on floppy disk or CD-ROM sells for \$249 and contains information on 950 different species of wood, including color photos of wood grain. A \$39 version due out soon will contain only about 300 of the most readily available species. For information, contact Tree Talk, P.O. Box 426, Burlington, VT 05402; 800/858-6230.



Union labor is uncommon in residential construction. But in nonresidential building, union labor predominates, according to a report from the Construction Labor Research Council (202/223-8045). The group says that union contractors do 60% of all nonresidential construction in the U.S., and spend about \$175 million dollars annually on the training of 90,000 apprentices.

You can check whether your building design complies with the CABO Model Energy Code using a \$15 software package from Iris Communications (800/346-0104). Known as MECcheck, the program was developed by Pacific Northwest Laboratory for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The user just enters building component areas and insulation levels. The program then calculates the building’s heat loss and compares it with the heat-loss values for a code-compliant building in the user’s climate zone. The program allows component trade-offs and trade-offs against high-efficiency hvac equipment.

Canada’s energy-efficient home program, R-2000, now includes recycled building materials among its certification requirements. To qualify for the program, new homes must include at least one building material made from recycled products. The program is putting together a list of approved materials.

On-Ramps to the Information Superhighway

To find out about commercial online services:

CompuServe, 800/487-9197
America Online, 800/827-6364
Prodigy, 800/776-3449
Delphi, 800/695-4005
Genie, 800/638-9636

For Internet and World Wide Web access:

Netcom, 800/353-6600
InterRamp, 800/774-0852
Exec-PC, 800/393-2721
AlterNet, 800/488-6383

Internet software:

Internet Chameleon, 800/558-7656
Internet In a Box, 800/557-9614
Internet Membership Kit, 800/743-5369

Once you're on the Internet, start your search with the following useful online directories:

Yahoo (<http://www.yahoo.com>)

Commercial Services on the Net
(<http://www.directory.net/>)

WWW Business Yellow Pages
(<http://www.cba.uh.edu/yellowpages/yellowpages.html>)

Cyberspace, *continued*

time, and online computer resources sometimes promise more than they deliver. Particularly in the wide-open, nonprofit Internet, which operates largely without rules or standards, computer-accessible sites sometimes have the look and feel of a real organization while offering little in the way of information or services. As JLC computer columnist Craig Savage puts it, "They're a bunch of Hollywood storefronts."

Internet sites that cater to construction professionals are an innovation that is still in its infancy. However, as more users participate, the value of the Internet's "construction" sites will continue to grow. And some users already find cyberspace an excellent medium for research and learning.

"Work on older and historic buildings involves a lot more problem solving than new building work," says preservation consultant John Leeke. He uses online resources to find uncommon building materials and specialists with unusual skills. "Often these are the traditional crafts and trades, but sometimes it involves high-tech materials and methods."

Commercial vendors. If you're inexperienced in the online world, commercial services like CompuServe, America Online, Prodigy, and Genie are a good place to start. They offer good customer service, plenty of online help, and a wide array of information sources. They also pre-screen and compartmentalize their content, so you won't have to wade through a lot of trivial chatter.

One of the most popular features of these services is the online forum, a kind of electronic bulletin board.

Members can post public messages for others to read and reply to. Many contractors hang out at CompuServe's Dwellings forum, where you're likely to find dozens of ongoing discussions on any given day. A sampling of recent topics included installing quarry tile floors, using interior design software, repairing stucco, and installing French drains.

On America Online, you'll find a forum known as Places, which stands for Planning, Landscaping, Architecture, Construction, Engineering, and Specifications. Started as a resource for Mac-based designers and architects, it now regularly posts messages from builders and offers information and files for both Mac and PC users.

If you want to check out what's on the customers' minds, you might drop in on AOL's Home forum, where homeowners and home buyers meet to discuss issues of concern.

The Internet. The global network of interconnected computers known as the Internet offers a much greater volume of information than the commercial online services. Around an early backbone of big university and government computers, the system has grown to include uncoun- ted numbers of computer networks linked in patterns that no one fully understands. The Internet is less well organized than are the commercial services — in fact, the Internet has no central organization. But new software

packages like Mosaic and NetScape are making the Internet easier to navigate. These programs give home computer users an easy-to-use point-and-click interface for searching out information on the thousands of linked computers known as the World Wide Web.

Commercial services are now racing each other to provide Internet access. If you're already on a service like CompuServe, fellow users can teach you how to access the Internet and help you search for useful information (on CompuServe, look for the Internet New Users forum or the Internet Resources forum).

Scores of vendors now offer direct access to the Internet through dial-up connections. These vendors often offer faster data transmission speeds than the commercial services, at competitive prices.

To start exploring cyberspace, you'll need a computer, modem, and communications software. These days, a 14.4-kbps (kilobyte per second) modem is the standard; 28.8 kbps is twice as fast for not much more money. The commercial online services provide free or inexpensive software to connect to their systems, send electronic mail, enter forums, download files, and take advantage of other services. Many Internet service providers also furnish software for electronic mail, browsing the World Wide Web, and other functions. □

Writer Al Bredenberg's home-page address for Web cruisers is <http://www.copywriter.com/ab/>. Look there for more builder resources.

The *Journal of Light Construction* is currently exploring our options for providing elements of the magazine online. You can e-mail us your comments and suggestions at 76176.2053@compuserve.com.