Window Trim for Thick Walls

Most new homes are built with 2x4 or 2x6 exterior walls. But sometimes energy-efficient details require a thicker wall profile to accommodate increased insulation levels, and sometimes walls are thickened to match a local architectural style. Trimming the finished window openings in these "fat" walls can be tricky, so we called three builders from around the country and asked them how they do it.

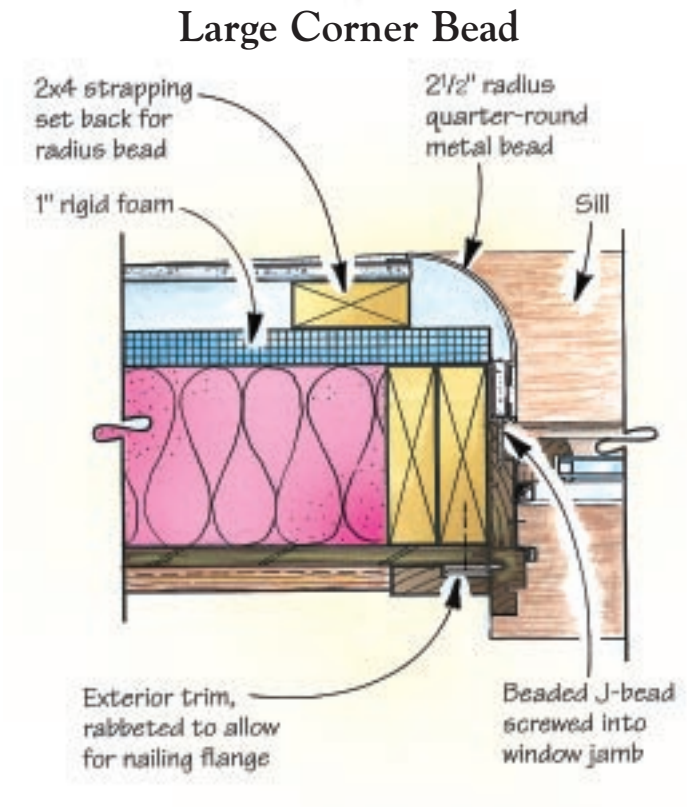
CHUCK SILVER
Hudson River Design
New Paltz, N.Y.

Most of the homes we design have 2x6 exterior walls with 1 inch of rigid foam on the interior, covered with 2x4 horizontal strapping. With sheathing and drywall, the walls are 9 inches thick. We detail the drywall returns with metal corner bead at the head and large-radius metal beads at the jambs (2½-inch to 3-inch radius). The large radius produces a gentle curve that looks just right with the 8/4 sill stock we use. We buy the large-radius corner beads from Milgo/Bufkin (68 Lombardy St., Brooklyn, NY 11222; 718/388-6476). At $2.50 per foot, these beads are pricey, but the overall cost of finishing the window opening is comparable to using conventional trim.

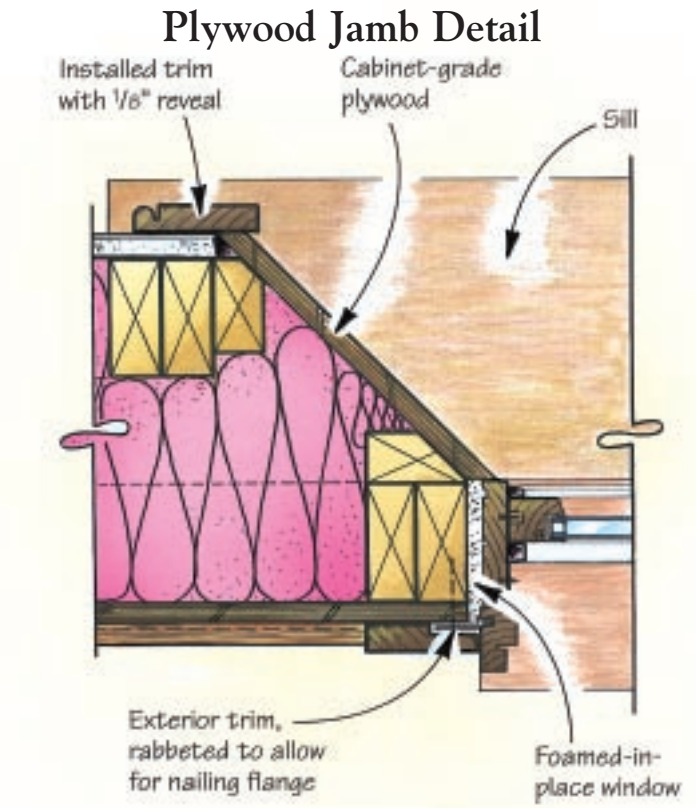
To produce a consistent reveal at the window, we fasten a "beaded" metal J-bead directly to the window jamb by running drywall screws through the inner portion of the channel. The drywall is slipped into the channel, and the finishers run compound right to the raised lip of the metal J-bead.

Splayed Jambs

We've designed a number of houses with 11½-inch-thick double 2x4 walls, using splayed window jambs to allow more light in. We case the openings with wood trim and make the jamb extensions from cabinet-grade plywood. If the trim and windows are to receive a stain or clear finish, we use a plywood of the same species as the casing.



For thick walls, Chuck Silver uses drywall jambs with large-radius corner bead. He slides the drywall into a metal J-bead attached to the window frame and finishes right up to the raised bead.



Where wood trim is requested, Silver uses cabinet-grade plywood to create a splayed window opening in his double-wall systems. If the wood trim will receive clear finish, he uses a matching plywood.

WILL PRULL
Prull and Associates
Santa Fe, N.M.

Here in the Southwest, our customers often want thick walls that simulate the look of adobe. True adobe walls are typically either 10 inches thick (single thickness) or 20 inches thick (double thickness). We use 2x10 studs and plates to match the single-thickness adobe, and a double-wall system to match the double-thickness adobe.

Our interior finish is two-coat plaster over blueboard, detailed to match the adobe look. We usually splay the head and jambs of window and door openings, although occasionally we build 90-degree plaster returns. To achieve the hand-troweled look of adobe, we avoid square or quarter-round corner beads at the window openings. Instead, we fasten "strip lath" (5-inch-wide pieces of expanded wire lath) at the splayed returns of the window jambs and heads. This allows our plaster masons to create slightly irregular corners that mimic traditional adobe plaster.

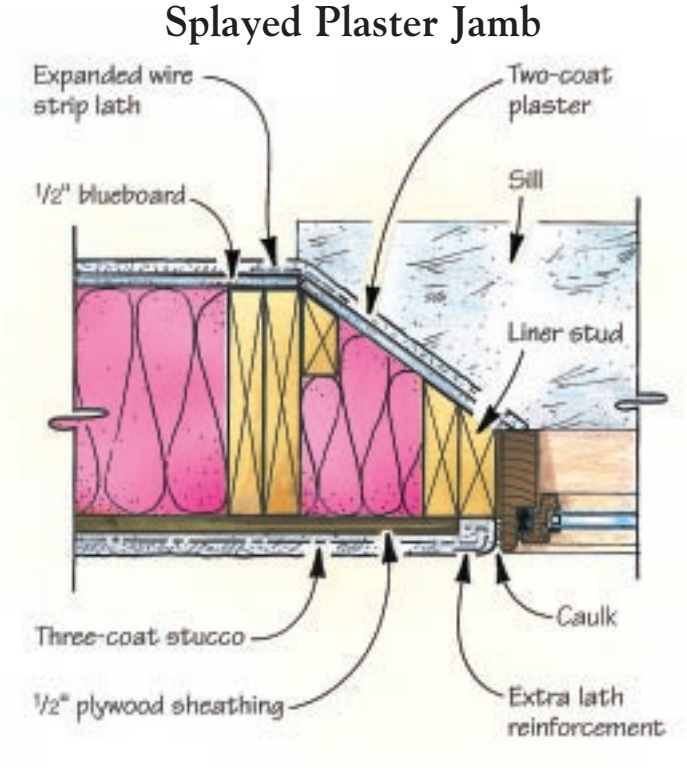
We run plaster right up to the window jamb, and seal the joint with paintable caulk when the walls will be painted. When a clear finish will be applied to the wall, we seal this joint with a tinted "buff" caulk manufactured by C-Cure Color Caulk (16225 Park Ten Place, Suite 850, Houston, TX 77084; 800/895-2874) that matches the natural plaster.

We use either thick wood or stone sills, depending on the client's preference. We install the sills before the plaster work begins, covering them with red rosin paper for protection as the plaster is applied. Occasionally we create a plaster sill, using the same plaster return details described above. These plaster sills can be horizontal or splayed.

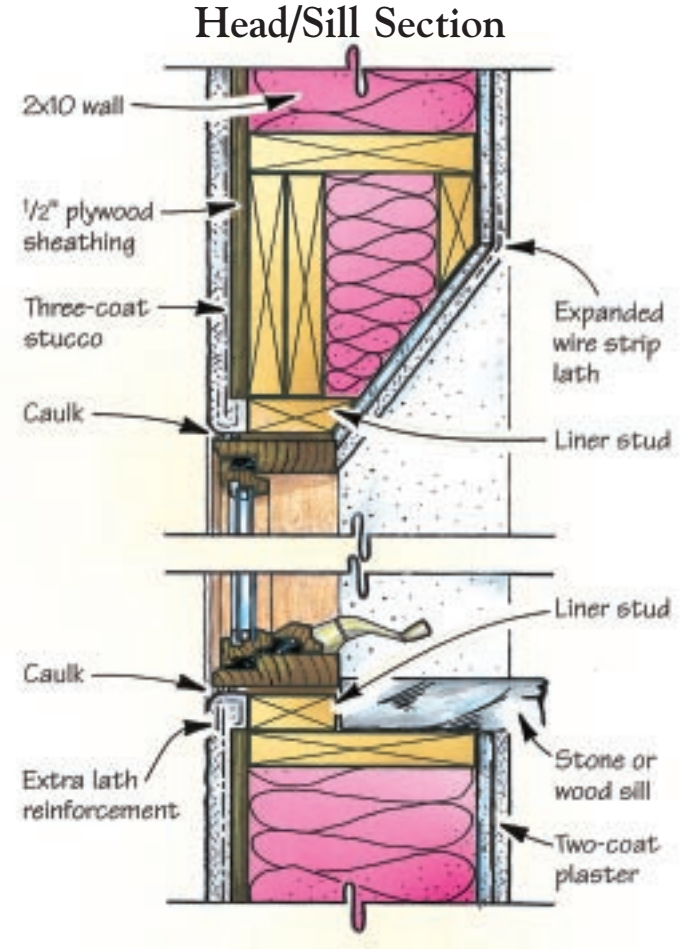
All Walls Are Not Created Equal

Our thicker wall systems are more expensive than standard 2x6 frame wall construction, so we offer customers the option of choosing where they want the adobe look. Often we build thicker walls in the "public" areas, and revert to less expensive 2x6 construction in secondary rooms and walls without window or door penetrations.

We're using pumice-crete walls for about a quarter of our homes now, and although these walls are much different from frame construction, the way we finish the window openings is basically the same. The major difference is that the plaster can be applied directly to the pumice-crete base.



To match the look of traditional adobe, Will Prull uses splayed plaster window jambs. Instead of corner bead where the jamb meets the wall, he uses metal strip lath to create the wavy look of true adobe.



The window units are set on dimension lumber "liners" to accommodate the height of the thick wood or stone sills Prull typically uses.

Bill Eich
Bill Eich Construction
Spirit Lake, Iowa

For typical exterior walls we use 2x6 studs with an inch of rigid foam on the outside. We use mainly medium-grade vinyl windows, trimmed with drywall returns on the inside. Since the framing is 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches behind the window's nailing flange (which installs over the exterior foam board), only 1/4 to 1/2 inch of the window unit would rest on the 2x6 rough sill; the rest would sit on foam. We solve this problem by fastening a 6 1/2-inch-wide strip of 1/8-inch Masonite hardboard to the rough sill, projecting out over the top of the foam. This gives us just enough support for the window until the unit is thoroughly nailed off, but it doesn't require enlarging the manufacturer's rough opening dimensions.

Joint Treatment

On the inside, we first experimented with slipping the drywall return into a vinyl J-bead fastened to the window frame, but this resulted in a clunky-looking detail. We then switched to hanging the drywall returns tight to the window, but the rockers weren't very careful with the fit, and the joint had to be flat-taped before painting (a job our finishers despised).

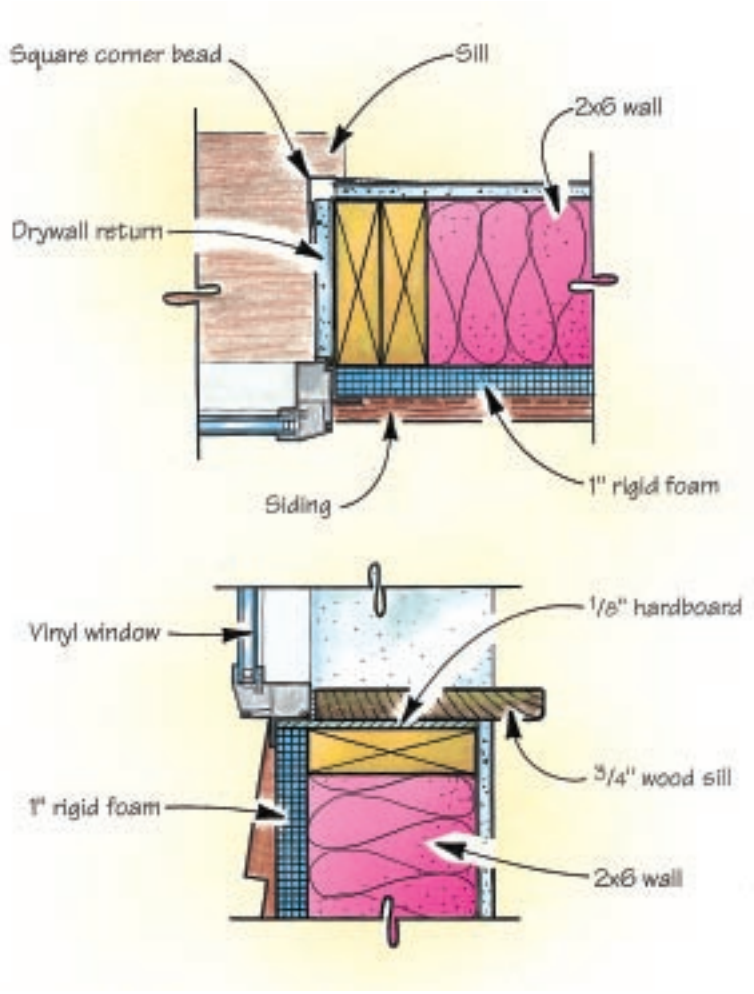
Now our "window process" starts right after the poly vapor barrier is installed. We carefully cut out the plastic around the rough window opening and use the piece to cover the window unit. After the drywall is hung, we cut and fit the drywall returns, butting them tight to the window. To get a good fit, the edge of the drywall must be cut clean and square (my foreman, Rollie Peschon, rips the pieces on a table saw). These returns help hold the protective poly in place, and the butt joint can be caulked and painted after the poly is removed.

We're very careful to center the window units in their rough openings. This produces an even reveal at the butt joint and eliminates any shimming. We use metal drywall corner bead at the head and jambs, and fit the 3/4-inch pine sill after the drywall is finished and painted.

Wide Wooden Extension Jambs

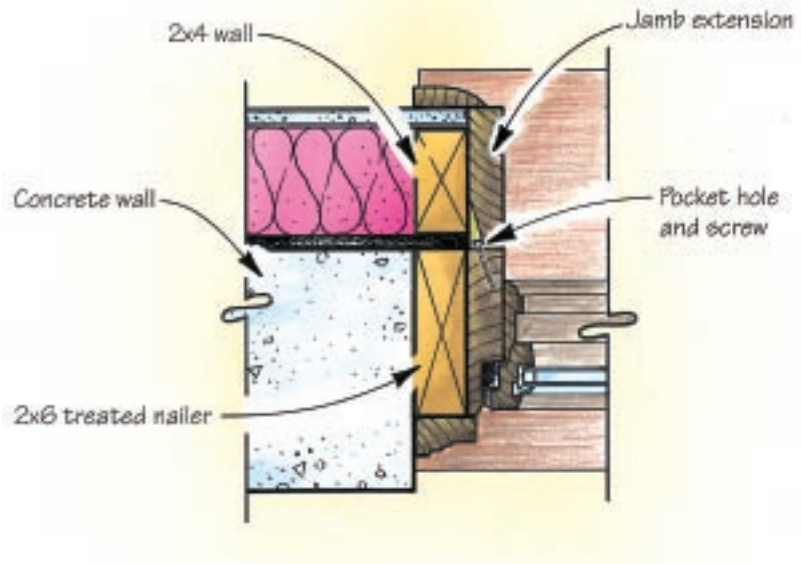
We use another "production" technique in cases where the client wants wood trim in a thick wall — for example, in a finished walk-out basement, where we frame 2x4 walls inside the concrete foundation wall. To avoid tedious shimming and fitting, we fasten the wide jamb extensions directly to the window unit before it's installed. We use a pocket hole-boring jig called the Kreg Jig (available from McFeely's Square Drive Screws, P.O. Box 11169, Lynchburg, VA 24506; 800/443-7937), which creates angled pilot holes on the back side of the jamb extension. Drywall screws pull the extension jamb tight to the window unit for a strong, clean joint with no visible fasteners. ■

Drywall Return



Bill Eich uses vinyl windows in a 2x6 wall covered with an inch of rigid foam. A strip of 1/8-inch hardboard supports the window during installation. The drywall jamb returns are ripped on the table saw to give a clean butt joint at the window, which requires no taping.

Wood Jamb Extension



The Kreg pocket hole jig makes adding wide extension jambs to wood windows a cinch. Eich avoids tedious shimming by fastening the extensions before the window unit is installed.