



THE JOURNAL OF LIGHT CONSTRUCTION

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JLC's

Letters

Proper Wrapping

To the Editor:

Thank you for the insights into the proper way to install housewrap ("Wrapping the House: Do's & Don'ts, 3/00). I can see that I have made a few mistakes, but now I have no doubt about the proper way to tackle flashing and wrapping details. We do have a brake and use it.

Al Brand
Valhalla, N.Y.

Competing With the Big Boxes

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Paul Eldrenkamp's article on charging for estimates (*Strictly Business*, 3/00). Although I agree that we should not charge for estimates, I think the dialogue about what is "included" in a package of services is important.

I have observed an "unbundling" trend in services from lawyering to home improvement. Some lawyers will allow you to do your own title search or file your own papers at the court house, unbundling them from their former package. The building contractor has the urge to unbundle design, specifying, and estimating from the providing of material and labor. We have great examples: Lowe's, Home Depot, Menard's, and other stores sell product and sometimes labor at low prices. But the buyer takes on added responsibility, including evaluating quality and suitability (specifying), making sure the product fits (design), getting the goods home and arranging the installation, and worrying about permits and warranty items. Big Box retailers have unbundled these functions in the interest of low price, and they are succeeding for now.

The contractor who wants to charge for estimating (and the planning and specifying that go with it) is coming to the realization that he adds value to

the labor and material he provides. He wants to charge separately for services he formerly included, in order to demonstrate that he is competitive on material and labor. As long as we contractors allow consumers to establish value by merely adding together the advertised prices at the Home Center, we will need to charge separately for every added service.

A better industry response is to remind consumers that profit earned on products and installation allows us to do the planning that produces safe, on-time, on-budget projects. It saves buyers time, and keeps them away from unpleasant surprises. It lets them accurately know the *whole* cost ahead of time.

I sympathize with the contractor who wishes he could collect for the effort that goes into every estimate. But I think a more realistic approach is to improve our professionalism, really add value to the material and labor we provide, and work together to educate the public. The pendulum will swing back. Some consumers already know that a good contractor adds real value to his goods and trade labor. Others will realize it after their Big Box project goes haywire.

Ray Klemchuk, Jr.
Marcelles Kitchen, Bath & Tile
Berwyn, Ill.

Nantucket: No Camping Allowed

To the Editor:

I took particular interest in the *Backfill* column by Jon Vara in the April '00 issue. I am a lifelong resident and native of Nantucket and I own and operate a contracting business on the island. It distressed me to see the cost of land and the rate for a good carpenter in print. I would have to say that Mr. Vara did not do much research to write this article.

The cost of land on Nantucket is staggering, but nowhere near the cost cited by Mr. Vara. The cost of a buildable lot varies with location, obviously. Waterfront property can still be had for about \$800,000 per acre. My data comes from the latest issue of the real estate revue in the local newspaper. There are many lots listed for about \$200,000. Some of these lots are small, about 5,000 square feet. This would still make a buildable acre about \$1,800,000.

The wage scale listed is way out in space also. A high-end general contractor on the island may charge upwards of \$55 dollars an hour. A good carpenter may get about \$25 to \$30 an hour if he is actually an employee. Most of the guys are charging \$35 to \$45 per hour.

The local police definitely frown on sleeping on job sites in trucks or otherwise. There are not too many campers or construction workers out here. We have a few town bylaws that are enforced very strictly and camping out is one of them. If it were not, there would not be as big a housing shortage as there is.

Buzz Polchinski
Nantucket, Mass.

Jon Vara responds: My land price figures were provided by the Nantucket building department, based on recent sales of small lots. The estimated carpenter's wage came from the same source. If I'd been writing a story about land prices and wages, I would have collected cost data from a number of sources — but I mentioned those rough figures simply to illustrate the island's lack of reasonably priced housing. Mr. Polchinski's figures underscore the same point: If a carpenter earning \$70 an hour can't afford to pay several thousand a week for a summer rental, what chance does a \$35 to \$55 carpenter have? While it would be irresponsible to endorse Thomas Johnson's approach to underground building, it's not hard to admire his initiative and creativity.

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