

Quality Standards for Builders

by Dave Holbrook

What's Good Enough?

At one point in history, I think it was in medieval times, it was considered possible for a learned person to be capable of absorbing all that there was of written knowledge. Today, even within the context of a single field, that conceit is nothing short of ridiculous. In order for a builder to keep up with inter-related trade technologies, reliance on prescriptive standards and building codes should be standard operational procedure.

Within any specialization, a practitioner will undoubtedly want to rely on exhaustive standards for that trade, but for a general contractor or construction supervisor, a more general overview is appropriate. That's the impetus behind *Residential & Light Commercial Construction Standards* (1998, R.S. Means, Construction Plaza, 63 Smiths Ln., Kingston, MA 02364; 800/448-8182; www.rsmeans.com; \$59.95), a compilation of major building codes, trade customs, and industry standards.

Drawing on what are presumably some of the best or most concise sources for the various trades and applications, this book presents excerpts from model building codes and industry standards, along with comments from several building-professionals-turned-editors based on their respective experiences in the field.

The editorial comments range from sage, as in "... never apply a quick-setting compound (using a chemical accelerator) directly to metal trim. The cement will react to the galvanized coating and the item will delaminate," to superfluous, such as "Metal shingles should be installed by roofers who are trained in the particular techniques required." The most welcome commentary from these editors comes in the rephrasing of the industry standards, which although usually clear, make for tedious reading if left



in their native jargon. I would like to have seen the same interpretive application accorded to the code excerpts, but perhaps it's that very inscrutability that makes the code what it is and its enforcement officials so entertaining.

Oversights. There isn't a standard written that couldn't be improved by an accompanying drawing or chart and, while included here, they are sparsely distributed. Under less than rigorous proofreading, the use of apostrophe and quotation marks to indicate feet and inches can drift you out of dry tech into comedy. Unless, that is, you believe the Industry Standards on page 313 that stipulate that you must "Use two hinges for solid core doors up to 60' in height, three hinges for doors up to 90' in height, and an additional hinge for every additional 30" of door height" I think we know what they mean to say.

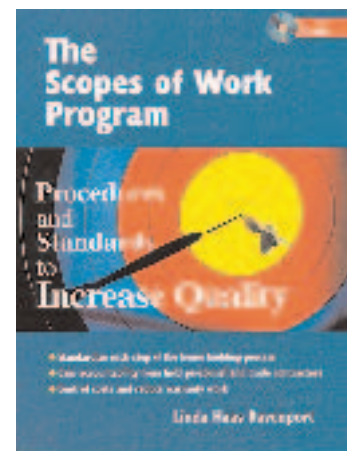
Common building applications, from asphalt paving to wood framing to painting and wall covering, and almost everything else in between gets some mention, so even if you're a medieval genius, you'll learn something, but not everything, new here.

Establishing Expectations

Moving from the general to the specific, the rubber meets the road in *The*

Scopes of Work Program: Procedures and Standards to Increase Quality by Linda Haas Davenport (2001, Home Builder Press, 1201 15th St., NW, Washington, DC 20005; 800/223-2665; www.builder-books.com; \$74.95). What if you, as a builder, could take a proactive stance in the area of customer expectations, perform above and beyond standard and usual practice, and all but eliminate the need for warranty repairs? The practical experience and organized approach of the author says that you can, regardless of the current size or sophistication of your operations.

Quite simple in concept, the scopes of work program is a combination of information and operating procedures that directs the progress of daily job activities. A contract agreement between the GC and each trade contractor outlines expectations of quality and performance, and determines when each phase of the job is satisfactorily complete. The concept is nothing more radical than

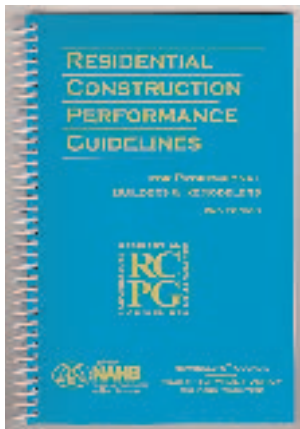


the expectation that people assume responsibility for the quality of their performance. There is, of course, a catch: You'll have to gradually move out of doing "business as usual" if you're less than consistent about doing paperwork and plenty of it.

Of this 200-plus page book, about 20 pages explain the concept and its benefits. The balance is dedicated to standardized scopes of work by trade and related inspection reports. These are also included in the back of the book on a CD in MS Word format for printing and adapting by the individual company. One thing really bothers me, though: The business approach outlined in this book assumes that all work is performed by trade (formerly known as sub-) contractors. Of course this isn't the case with every firm, but the methodology remains applicable to whatever proportion of the job is contracted out. This book offers a powerful business tool, but it bears remembering that a tool is essentially neutral, and therefore only as effective as the hand wielding it.

The Referee

What's often missing from the individual contract or job specification is a set of standards by reference. That is, exactly what does it mean when the contract states, for example, "All work to be performed in a workmanlike manner?" By tagging contract language with a specific reference to a specific guide-



line, all parties to a contract can agree at the outset to defer to a prescriptive standard that establishes a reasonable measure of job performance and quality.

The newly released *Residential Construction Performance Guidelines for Professional Builders and Remodelers — 2nd Edition* by the National Association of Home Builders (2000, Home Builder Press, Business Management Dept., 1201

15th St., NW, Washington, DC 20005; 202/822-0200 ext. 113; www.builder-books.com; \$31.25) provides a useful tool for that very purpose. Compiled, composed, and nurtured to life by hundreds of homebuilding professionals, and scrutinized before publication by scores of individual reviewers and trade organizations, the *2nd Edition* is a guideline written for and by people in your line of work.

Suppose that your customer complains about the siding you've recently installed, claiming that it isn't level. He's been out there with a transit and has found a $\frac{5}{16}$ -inch discrepancy in the third course from the bottom of his home's 44-foot-long facade. Your final payment is in the balance. If your signed contract referred to the *RCPGPBR*, Exterior Finish 4-22, you would open to page 25 together and gaze with clarity and relief at the text which states, "Any piece of siding more than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch off parallel in 20 feet with contiguous courses is unacceptable, unless the owner and the contractor have previously agreed to disregard the performance guideline to match a pre-existing structural condition."

The guidelines are stated in plain language to avoid misconstrued and distorted interpretations, but you've got to keep them on your side of the fence by application on the job. By also copying text references into the work orders you send out into the field, your crew and trade contractors will know what's expected as a minimum standard of quality (which, of course, they're encouraged to exceed).

Refer to this text in every contract you sign — I think it's one of the best contract documents going.

In a wise nod to the frugality of this nation's builders, the NAHB has made the entire contents of the *RCP...*, ah, let's call them *The Guidelines*, available in a slightly different format as a 36-page paperback called the *Homeowner Reference*, bundled in packets of 10, for \$62.50.



FREE & CHEAP

EIFS, Ends, and Butts

Getting the details right, all or nothing, is the name of the EIFS game. The EIFS Industry Members Association (EIMA) offers a free, 18-page Guide to Exterior Insulation and Finish System Construction, with sketches and explanations showing EIFS integration in a typical wall assembly. You can download the guidelines at the EIMA website or send for the booklet.

Contact: EIFS Industry Member Association, 3000 Corporate Center Drive, Suite 270, Morrow, GA 30260; 800/294-3462; www.eifsfacts.com.

Free Green

If you or your client want to "green-factor" your materials, try the free BEES 2.0 compact disk (Building for Environmental



and Economic Sustainability) from the Pollution Prevention Information Clearinghouse. The decision support software examines 65 building products through all stages, from raw material acquisition to disposal, to produce an overall economic and environmental evaluation.

Contact: EPA, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20460-7409 www.epa.gov/opptintr/epp/bees.htm

E-Bricks

If you design with CAD or a 3D modeling program, you may enjoy laying brick using the free Virtual Mason CD. Combine bond patterns and coursing with 200 brick colors and 41 mortar colors to preview thousands of possible wall design variations.

Contact: Acme Brick, P.O. Box 425, Fort Worth, TX 76101; 800/792-1234; www.acmebrick.com.

