

Carpentry 101

by Dave Holbrook

Building is a hands-on experience and any book on the subject a pale substitute, so I approach carpentry tomes with skepticism. There's no way anyone's going to get it all between two covers, let alone get it right. Leafing through the 795 pages of *Modern Carpentry: Building Construction Details in Easy-to-Understand Form* by Willis H. Wagner and Howard Bud Smith (2000; Goodheart-Willcox Publisher, 18604 W. Creek Dr., Tinley Park, IL 60477; 800/323-0440; www.goodheartwillcox.com; \$50) is by no means a complete waste of time: There



are loads of good color photographs and illustrations, and introductions to many of the tools and materials of the trade. Organized into 7 sections comprising 25 units, it's easy enough to navigate. But say we just landed at Section 2: "Footings, Foundations, and Framing," Unit 7, "Waterproofing." The information is given in a you-could-do-this-or-you-could-do-that

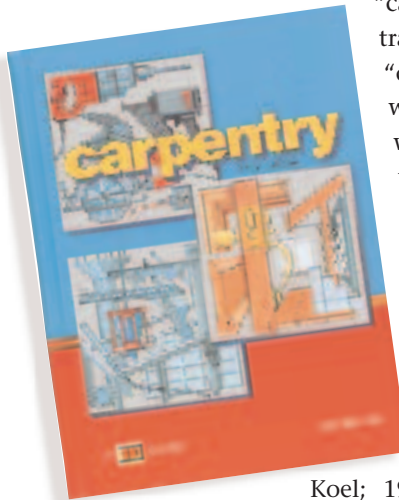
general and incomplete manner, without sufficient detail, direction, or preference. I didn't learn what the pros do, and that's exactly my point: These aren't "construction details," they're generalities. Waterproofing, as just one example, is a stand-alone topic that another author could burn up 795 pages on, with a much better chance at providing true detail. You might also ask what foundation waterproofing has to do with carpentry, per se. Another example: The chapter on floor framing appears to assume that the foundation is inherently absolutely square (wouldn't that be nice?), because we never end up squaring the sill or the deck — let's get those wacky walls up now. And where's handrailing? — a common carpentry task, and among the most demanding to perform. It's mentioned, but barely.

Grousing more or less aside, I like the semi-witty combination heading of the final section: "Scaffolds and Careers." And I like the book's general overview; it's logical, linear, and reasonably up to date in its coverage of materials. A good instructor or boss could take the format as a jumping-off point and run with it — to the nearest job site, for the real thing. Grade: B.

Missing Details

When I get fuzzy about the meaning of a term, I haul out the dictionary for a little clarity. *Webster's New World* defines

"carpentry" as "the work or trade of a carpenter," and "carpenter" as "a workman who builds and repairs wooden things, esp. the wooden parts of buildings...." Sounds simple enough, though we all know it's a trade that takes years of painstaking attention to master. Unfortunately, the author of *Carpentry* —



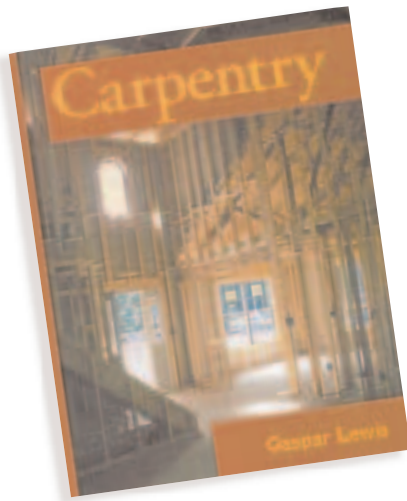
Third Edition, (Leonard

Koel; 1997; American Technical Publishers, 1155 W. 175th St., Homewood, IL 60430; 800/323-3471; www.americanotech.org; \$50) doesn't stick to the point long enough to teach us very much. Today, construction is divided into so many specialty trades, including "framing carpenter" and "finish carpenter," that it doesn't make complete practical sense to me to cover concrete form-making, let alone "Foundation Design for Heavy Construction" in a book on carpentry. Precast tilt-up walls? Lift-slab building? Huh? I could use a shortcut chapter like "Dealing with Trade Contractors" or "Joining the Teamsters" instead. As a carpenter, I work in a specialty trade. Why do I want to know about "Temperature Control, Condensation, and Ventilation"? There's hardly a stick of wood in the whole system, fer criminy sakes. Heading right for the hard stuff — stairs — you may figure out the treads and risers from the text, but you'll have to take a bye on the handrail — the author did. The window unit immediately follows a unit on flashing, but follow the latter instructions and your window installation won't include any head flashing — oops. The novice whose defense is "But I did it by the book" would be right, but he'd get it wrong.

So, although there are lots of illustrations and plenty of information, the focus is off-center, and the details need more attention. Grade: C-.

Consistent Details

The introduction to *Carpentry*, by Gaspar Lewis (1994, Delmar Publishers, 3 Columbia Circle, Box 15015, Albany,




NY 12212; 800/842-3636; www.delmar.com; \$68), gives a thorough definition of the terms “carpenter” and “carpentry” (if you want more clarity than *Webster’s New World* gives).

Attention classroom instructors: Mr. Lewis includes the right details, and gets the details right. You can almost tell from a look at the table of contents that we’re not headed off on a mind-numbing journey into theories or gross-overviews. We’re going to work, where it seems the author has spent some quality time. Grab your tools, girls and boys; we’re going to build a staircase and install some handrailing, step by step. Each chapter concludes with review questions (as do the other two books noted above), along with a reflective sidebar series called “Building for Success,” where the author looks at issues such as “Job Planning to Avoid Stress,” “Sound Work Ethics: Obsolete or Essential?,” “The Importance of Following Instructions,” “The Building Inspector — Friend or Foe?” and

“Customer Relations in Construction.” These topics help bring home vital issues beyond trade technique and touch on the visceral skills necessary to succeed in the business of carpentry, where too many good craftsmen fail.

The chapter on blueprints doesn’t mention CAD drafting technology (although some of the illustrations seem to have been drawn that way) or current methods of plan reproduction. That’s not going to hang anyone up, though. And none of the installation procedures invoke the use of a nail gun but defer instead to the humble hammer, which is still one heckuva tool. A guy I used to work with maintained, “First you get good, then you get fast.” That’s right.

It takes 946 pages to convey what the author wants us to know, but he knows his subject and sticks to it. Grade: A. 

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