Letters

IRC Sprinkler Rule Misinformed

I find a couple of things disturbing about the decision by the International Code Council to require sprinklers in new homes (*In the News,* 12/08). First and simplest is the apparent lack of facts involved. Sure, sprinklers will save lives, but how many and at what cost?

It's a cold calculus, but there is an accepted value to a life: more if you're rich, less if you're poor. Consider the payouts from the World Trade Center settlement. One commonly accepted average figure is $5 million per life. Based on the average cost of a residential sprinkler system cited in the article, $1.61 per square foot, a cost of $3,000 per house is a reasonable figure for the sake of argument. Dividing $5 million by $3,000, we get 1,666 houses per life — that is, the cost of sprinkling 1,666 houses equals the value of one life.

Phrased differently, will sprinkling 1,666 houses save one life? I doubt it. There just aren't that many significant fires these days and most of them are in existing stock. Obviously, I've oversimplified: What about severe fires mitigated by sprinklers and life-threatening injuries made less severe? But the principle is straightforward; the problem is that I see no evidence it's been applied.

If our country were infinitely rich, I wouldn't worry about the money, but as recent events have made clear, we are a lot poorer than we thought and it's time to start prioritizing. Maybe that money would be better spent on safer cars. Each year, 50,000 people die in cars — versus the 3,000 fire deaths cited in your article.

Bob Fankhauser
Portland, Ore.

Rain Screen for Cement Stone Veneer

It's clear from his repair of the failed faux-stone wall ("Rescuing a Manufactured-Stone Wall," 12/08) that Mark Parlee is a skilled and conscientious professional, but I wonder if a simpler approach might have solved his problem.

Parlee used procedures specified by the stone's manufacturer. I count five layers of material (and subsequent labor) to get to the point of adhering the stone. That doesn't include detailing the window opening, which is even more complicated. It strikes me that his situation was an ideal opportunity to use a so-called "rain screen" wall, which is nothing but a fancy name for a double wall.

Why not protect the sheathing with felt, apply 1/4-inch-thick PT furring strips over the studs, then fasten 1/2-inch cement board (rough side out) to the studs? Parlee's approach depends on a drainage plane created by wrinkled building paper, but that pales in comparison with a quarter inch of pure air. That's the beauty of the double-wall concept: No water will leap across that space.

As for flashing the window opening, it's really a matter of common sense. The furring strips covering the taped nailing flanges should be kept away from the casing, and the furring strips above the window should stop short of the head flashing. That creates a generous drainage channel all around. Water runs downhill, so it's really all about getting out of the way.

Arne Waldstein
Housatonic, Mass.

Let It Drain

The article "Rescuing a Manufactured-Stone Wall" (12/08) was well organized and written. I especially appreciated the clear substrate and flashing details.

Given that there are many opinions on the subject, I did notice a possible concern. The detail shows a continuous sealant bead between the window flange and the FlexWrap at the rough sill, and a layer of self-adhering flashing tape placed over the flange onto the StuccoWrap. While the overall design is intended to deflect liquid water from the opening, this treatment at the rough sill could prevent drainage of any water that might find a way past the flashings and into the rough opening.

Burt Crockett
Clinton, Mo.

KEEP 'EM COMING!

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