

LETTERS



Timber Frame Story Sparks Interest

We have received a lot of mail about the story, "Timber Frame Fiasco," by William Lotz (10/91). We aren't able to print all the letters in their entirety, but here's a sampling.

To the Editor:

The article "Timber Frame Fiasco" by William Lotz demonstrates very poor taste in title selection on your part. Mr. Lotz details the extraordinary efforts expended by the timber framer to assess the reasons for rot in the home, remedy sources of the problem, and repair the home. Mr. Lotz specifically stated the rot was caused by excess moisture buildup inside the home due to negligence on the part of the homeowner (such as venting the clothes dryer inside the home).

I suggest that if your periodical feels the need to pen titles that rely on sensationalism, you stick closer to the truth in those titles. For instance, how about "Stupid Lawyer Rots Own Home" or "Fungus 1, Lawyer 0" for this article?

Bruce L. Gardner, president
Timber Framers Guild
Of North America
Keene, N.H.

To the Editor:

Having recently investigated a nearly identical decay problem in a five-year-old post-and-beam home in Massachusetts, I read William Lotz's story with great interest. While I agree that the home had excessive indoor relative humidity as a result of the owner's activities, I don't believe that water vapor carried into the wall cavity by air leaking around or through the timber frame contributed significantly to the decay discovered in the sheathing and framing.

The most likely source of the water that allowed the decay fungi to get started was already contained within the hemlock timbers themselves, and, to a lesser extent, in the lumber sheathing, when the home was built. Green (i.e., water-saturated) timbers are typically used in post-and-beam construction. Though surfaces may be dry to the touch, the interior of an 8x8 may take up to two years to dry to below the 28% moisture content that's required for decay fungi to establish themselves. Once they've got a foothold, fungi can carry on

their attack at a moisture content as low as 20%.

Closing in green, or at best surface-dry, timbers inside the wall retards water loss. All drying is forced to take place through the exposed face inside the home, and keeps the timbers at a decay-susceptible moisture content for a prolonged period. The high indoor relative humidity created by the owner further slowed drying. The pine lumber sheathing was probably also only partially air-dried, and contributed more water.

An 8-foot-long hemlock 8x8 contains about nine gallons (74 pounds) of water when green. When it eventually reaches the approximate 12% moisture content typically found in wall framing, it will contain only about one gallon of water, the other eight gallons having been released into the air or surrounding materials. Critical supporting evidence is Lotz's observation that the "pattern of rot closely followed the post-and-beam framing." If airborne water vapor leaking in and condensing inside the walls was truly the culprit, pockets of decay near electrical outlets, plumbing cutouts, floor/wall and wall/ceiling junctions, and other air leakage points, as well as attic condensation problems, would also be expected.

Stephen Smulski
Shutesbury, Mass.

To the Editor:

My former partner and I were the "ghost" builders of the structure that failed. The last thing that it was was a "timber frame fiasco." It was a dream house for the homeowners and to us, and an honor to the other professionals who call themselves timberframers. The house failed for the most part due to vapor transmission into the stud cavity with no way to exit to the outside. The process of correcting the problem was a fiasco. I feel that it was unfair and pure sensationalism to title the article as you did. It adversely reflects upon the time-honored tradition of timber-framing and the professionals who have a commitment and passion for this craft.

Robert Thurrell
Freeport, Maine

To the Editor:

The "Timber Frame Fiasco" by William Lotz (10/91) requires a reply to correct misleading statements, inappropriate innuendos, and errors in fact.

To suggest that "carpenter ants started the destruction, the lawyers finished it" is pure fiction. The only evidence of carpenter ants was found in one very small area near the south exterior door. Mr. Lotz correctly points out that "the decayed wood had attracted carpenter ants." Thus the damage was done before any ants arrived.

The fact that the homeowner is an attorney should have no bearing on this or any other case. To suggest otherwise is prejudicial. The owner's attorney tried for several months to have the original builders prepare an acceptable detailed plan to correct this damage. No plan was ever offered. This was a decision by the builder or his insurance company, not the lawyers.

Mr. Lotz incorrectly indicated that an offer to settle out of court was made for \$150,000, and it was refused. The only offer to pay the owners was for \$58,440.

Contrary to Mr. Lotz's report, the home was not "bulldozed." The chimney, doors, windows, and other materials were salvaged and the home was rebuilt on the same foundation and first floor deck.

Regarding the matter of excessive moisture in the original home, Mr. Lotz failed to report that the builder did not provide for kitchen ventilation or a dryer vent. The only ventilator, located in one bathroom, was grossly undersized. He also failed to note that a vapor barrier from the roof was allowed to continue down the outside wall as far as 4 feet. This, together with the exterior foam insulation, created a vapor barrier on the wrong side. Since the interior vapor barrier was not properly sealed, the moisture-laden air which exited into the wall cavity had no place to go. It condensed in the wall and created the damage.

There is no evidence that this family of four created any more than normal amounts of moisture in this home. A jury listened to the testimony and decided the builders had been negligent! In our system, the citizens decide, not the lawyers.

Howard M. Faulkner, professor
Energy Efficient Residential Design
Univ. of Southern Maine, Gorham

To the Editor:

I winced as I read William Lotz's story. The key phrase can be found in the third paragraph: "The owner, who is a lawyer..." This is not intended as lawyer bashing, but as a recognition

of the fact that we must be extremely careful when doing business with attorneys.

Roger D. Drosd
San Francisco, Calif.

To the Editor:

Come on now! Mr. Lotz's conclusion, that builders shouldn't build houses for lawyers without tight contracts, is unfair and way off the mark.

As for the house Mr. Lotz describes, it is hard to believe the fault lies solely with the homeowner. According to the author, the house fell apart mainly because the clothes dryer was not vented outdoors. But is that something the homeowner should have known by himself, or should the builder have mentioned something about it? Professionals depend on one another for more than just nailing sticks together or writing words on paper. It seems a bit strained to say the builder had no obligation to warn the homeowner about something simple like an unvented dryer.

In no way does the article justify the generalization about lawyers. It was a first-grade cheap shot and not worthy of your typically high editorial standards.

Markley S. Roderick
Pennsauken, N.J.

Toll-Free Finish Information

To the Editor:

Michael Purser presented an accurate report on water-based urethane hardwood floor finishes in the article, "Waterborne Finishes for Hardwood Floors," (10/91). He did, however, make one statement that we at Basic Coatings would like to rectify: "And hey, Mr. Manufacturer, how about an 800 number to give us a little break when we do have a question or run into a snag?" As a matter of fact, Basic Coatings does have an 800 number and we welcome calls from anyone who has a question about our products. The number is 800/247-5471.

Jennifer Evans
Marketing Services Manager
Basic Coatings
Des Moines, Iowa

Keep 'em coming... We welcome letters, but they must be signed and include the writer's address. *The Journal of Light Construction* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and clarity. Mail letters to JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.