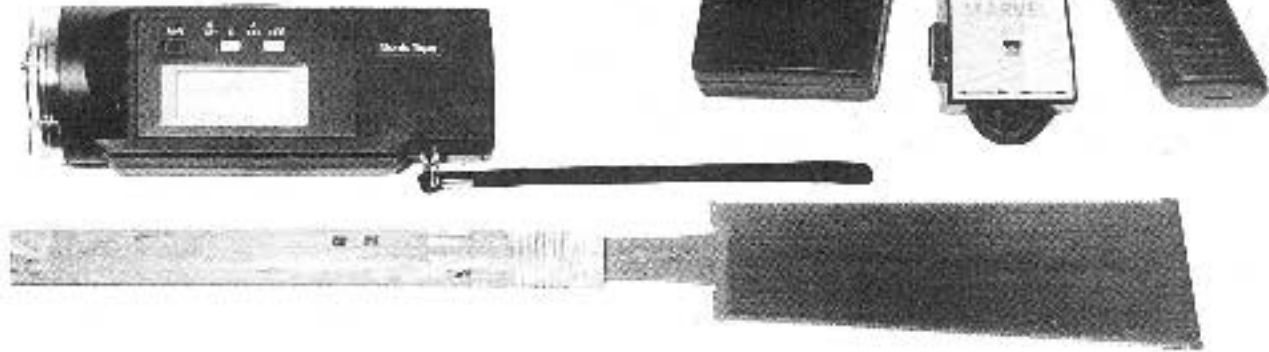


# Some Little-Known Tools of the Trade

by Jon Eakes



I often am surprised to discover that many contractors are unaware of several "gadget" tools to which I've become accustomed in renovations. So I've decided to deviate from my usual columns to talk about what have become my invaluable (albeit somewhat odd) working accessories.

Because tools often go by different names in my Canadian homeland, I won't get into brand names. But all of them are readily available south of the border.

## Electronic Stud Finders

Let's start with finding studs. The old magnetic stud finders are useless—but you already know that. Two electronic types do work quite well, however.

One is simply a specialized metal detector that hunts out nail heads or pipes and costs \$20 to \$30. Proper manipulation of the sensitivity adjustment can even tell you the approximate depth (up to three inches) of a hidden nail in a large beam.

hold it in your hand and run it along a wall, or attach something to its handle and roll guide it along the floor or up a wall.

The cheap ones work surprisingly well and usually are lighter and more compact than the costly versions surveyors use, but of course they don't last as long.

Sonar tapes are another option. They send out a sound signal, which is bounced off a flat surface back to the source, then calculate the time lapse and convert it into meters or feet (or both).

A variety of sonar tapes is available. All of them are able to store width, length and height at a minimum, giving easy square and cubic measurements. They are quite accurate—the margin of error is only 1/4" in 50 feet—and they work great for measuring individual rooms.

Not only do they save carpet people and the like tremendous time and energy—no one has to hold the other end of the tape, and they're great for shooting to the other end of the attic—but there's the added benefit of impress-

---

***The old magnetic stud finders are useless—but you already know that. Two electronic types do work quite well, however.***

---

Better yet—especially in old lath and plaster houses—is a "relative density detector." You put it on the wall, hold it there while it calibrates, then slide it along as it indicates various degrees of density in the wall. It detects wood, nails and wires, all in terms of relative density.

As a result, it can find studs even when there are no nails, and it can detect both the laths and the spaces between the laths. And if you "sensitize" it by holding it a fraction of an inch from the wall with your fingers, it's possible to distinguish between a stud and a pipe.

Keep in mind that sometimes the only way to fully analyze a wall without making any holes is to use the two detectors.

As far as drawbacks are concerned, neither of these electronic gadgets will function properly in the cold—so you should "keep them in your briefcase rather than your van, or at least bring them into a house an hour or so before you need them. And make sure the batteries are in good condition; old, leaky ones can destroy the circuit boards.

## Measuring Instruments

We all carry tape measures, but there are faster ways to make estimates and plan materials.

One such instrument is a rolling tape, which can cost anywhere from \$15 to \$150. You simply

ing your client with the high-tech effect of it all.

However, it's difficult to measure an entire house with a sonar tape, as you can rarely see from one end to the other on the inside, and there's no wall to bounce the signal back on the outside.

At an average cost of more than \$300, these devices fall into the specialty-measuring category, but they should become more common as the price comes down.

## Japanese Roba Saws

Even if you're not into exotic joinery, you should have one "ordinary" Japanese Roba saw, if for no other reason than its flexibility.

It cuts on the draw," allowing the use of very thin tempered steel, which can curve out from the line of cut as much as 35 or 40 degrees. This allows for quick and easy flush paring of hard-to-cut protrusions—and no knuckle scratching.

Where do you get these things? Specialty tool stores or mail-order houses have most of them. Professional surveyor stores have the expensive roller and sonic tapes.

Give them a try. Old ways may die hard, but I'm willing to bet that you'll never go back. •

*Jon Eakes is a home renovator, author and lecturer on construction practices in Canada.*