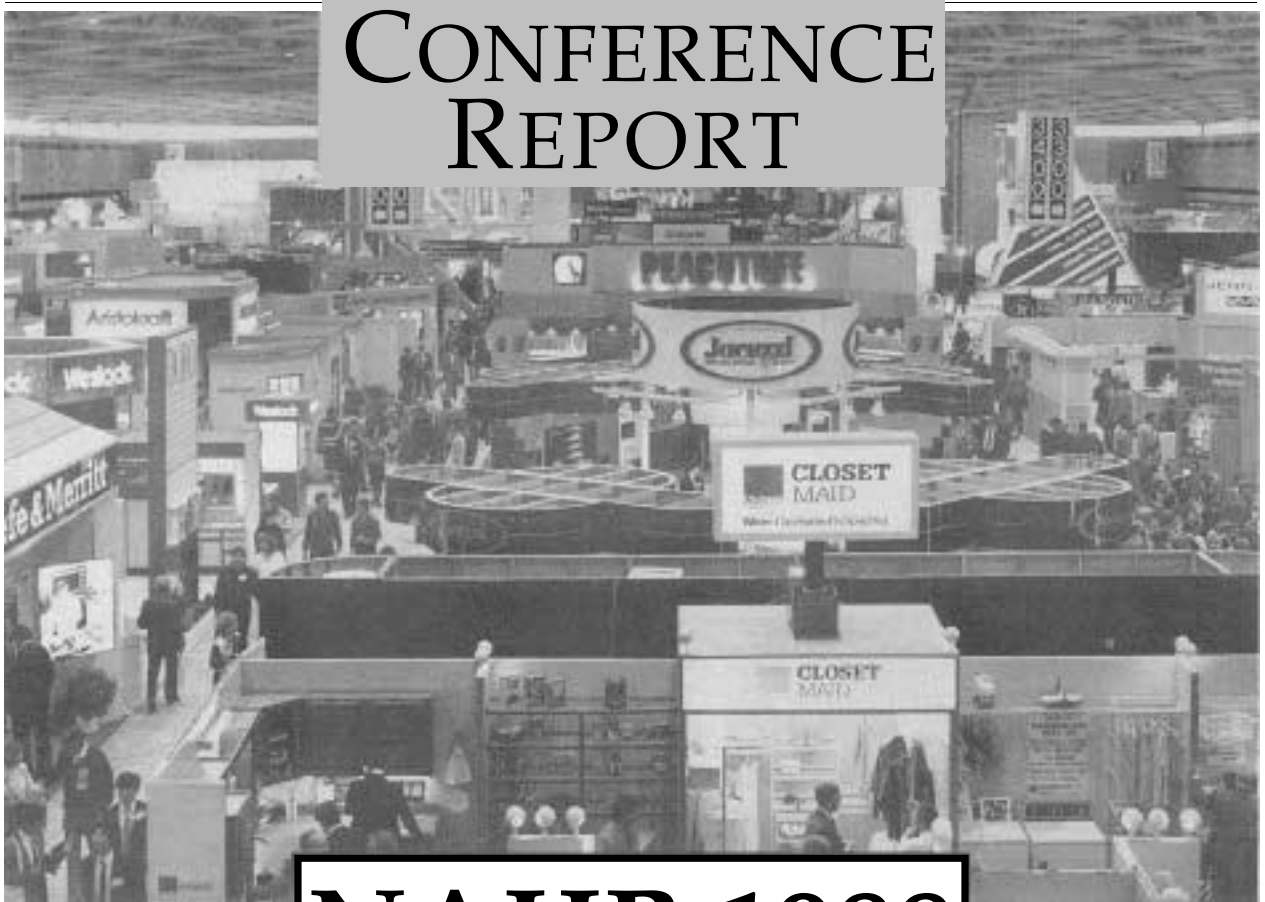


CONFERENCE REPORT



NAHB 1988

Annual builders' bash more than just pretty appliances...

An NAHB publication billed the 1988 Annual Convention and Exposition as the "largest building products and services show held anywhere in the world, bar none." Shows in Germany and France are reputedly much larger, but who cares. If you like big, you'll love the NAHB convention. Even if you don't, you owe it to yourself to witness at least once this annual rite of the American building industry. You can't help but be entertained, and to learn something useful as well. You'll also be heartened to find that builders—large and small—from all over the country have to contend with cracked concrete, late subs, complaining customers, and so on.

For those of you who didn't make it this year, here are a few conference highlights.

First the stats: The show in Dallas drew about 60,000 people and had over 1,000 exhibitors spread over 18 acres of display space. Over 700 speakers participated in 175 educational programs. Over 500 service staff kept the show running smoothly. To prepare for the conference, over five miles of new carpeting were installed in the convention center (and I walked all five of them several times over).

The seminars I attended were mostly good, but oriented somewhat toward larger spec and production builders—even though 45 percent of NAHB builder members build under 10 homes a year and nearly three-quarters build under 25. The big-builder slant is probably due more to the speakers—mostly successful developers—than to the topics themselves. Still, much of the information applies across the board to big and

small. I attended mostly business management and land-development seminars this year.

Get Organized

The general thrust of the management talks I heard was "be pro-active, not reactive." In other words, get organized, establish objectives, develop systems to accomplish them, and have more time to play golf. The alternative is living with chaos—a word that was used more than once.

In the area of subcontractor bids, Denver developer Patrick Hemill stressed the importance of standardized bid forms and rigid bid deadlines on large projects. Also, open the project only to subs you've qualified.

In the area of cost-control, much was said extolling the virtues of purchase orders, by another Denver developer Ed Arnold. POs allow you to know where the money is going before cutting the check—when you can still do something about it. "Variance" purchase orders allow you to track changes, although mysteries still occur, such as the following variance memo: "Unknown lumber ordered by unknown person."

In a session on subcontractors, the main points were to use a purchase-order system and have a good contract that makes your expectations clear about schedules, cleanup, inspection, payment, and so on. For your part, pay subs regularly at frequent intervals (a week to 10 days), give them plenty of notice, and be ready for them when you say you will. In return, ask for 30-days notice about any price increases.

Another interesting topic was

customer relations. Denver-area builder Ross Robbins says he cured his small company's customer-complaints "nightmare" by joining with a few other small builders to create a customer-service program he couldn't afford alone. The program included regular walk-throughs in new homes during the warranty period and a "homeowner-expectations" handbook. For repairs under \$100, the service rep makes his own decision in the field, relieving Robbins of petty problems and headaches.

Lynn Murray of Hutchinson Homes, a major Colorado developer, added these ideas:

- Undersell your product so as to not raise expectations too high.
- Be kind, but tough. Don't do for one person in a subdivision what you're not prepared to do for the rest.
- Hire customer-service people who can smile in the face of irate customers—and who are competent.
- During the first week or so, fix the little things like a broken screen even if you know it's not yours.
- Don't let subs talk to the customer during a callback.
- If a person is pushy and unreasonable, steer him or her toward a lawyer, who will be more rational and easier to deal with.
- "Remember, the customer is the problem, not the countertop."

Compact Living

Another major theme of the convention was how to make the most of small lots, small sites, and high-density development. Illinois architect Sal Balsamo stressed the psychological impact

of views from the entry of a house or room. The floor plan should direct the occupant's view across the room diagonally, which is the longest dimension—and preferably through glass in the opposite corner to "infinity." This is done largely by angling entries at 45 degrees to the room.

A number of speakers spoke on the do's and don'ts of high-density single-family development—or how to build something that looks and feels like the "American dream house on a tiny lot." It's a real puzzler; in fact, many of the plans fit together like jig-saw puzzles, and none are perfect. The alternative is clustering the homes and leaving more common open space. This is often cheaper and creates more open space, but some markets won't support attached housing.

Finally, Lucia Kittredge of Matarazzo Design in Concord, N.H., and land planner Don Brandes of Denver spoke on developing difficult sites: those with ledge, steep slopes, wetlands, etc. Both showed a number of striking examples of how liabilities can be inexpensively turned into assets by understanding the piece of land and working with it, not fighting it. Some principles: Keep out of natural drainage ways; balance cut-and-fill operations; adapt housing types to the existing grades; preserve natural vegetation, rock outcroppings, and drainage areas and use them as amenities.

Product Extravaganza

"NAHB conference?" a friend recently asked. "Isn't that the one where women run around in bathing suits sell-

ing gold bathroom faucets?" Well, that's part of it.

But behind the Hollywood glitter and PR schemes run amuck, lurk some real gems. In that spirit, NEB would like to present the following awards. The envelope please:

Best innovative new interior building material goes to Dimensional Drywall from Pitcon Industries (Riverdale, Md.). This is drywall which, using new technology, is formed into raised panels with a paintable or wood-veneer facing. Dimensional Drywall can be used for walls, wainscoting, cabinets, or ceilings. **Honorable mention** to curvable wall panels from Domtar Gypsum, Cleveland, Ohio.

Best original new use for an old product goes to United Steel Products Co. (Montgomery, Minn.) for Korner-Bac, its answer to drywall clips. Korner-Bac is a plain old lightweight steel angle with packaging and instructions for preventing drywall cracks. Honorable mention to Typar Landscape Fabric (Reemay, Old Hickory, Tenn.). Use this geotextile to keep plants from sprouting under brick walks, bark mulch, and wood decks.

Spiffiest new table tool: Hitachi's 8 1/2-inch Slide Compound Saw cuts accurate compound miters in stock up to 2x12s. And the runner-up is the Joker 125, a low-cost, water-cooled diamond saw for ceramic tiles, marble, bricks (from PRC Ltd., Granby, Quebec). "Cuts everything but fingers," said the salesman (as he touched the blade).

Cleverest instant hardwood flooring system goes to Rowi USA Inc. (Syracuse, N.Y.). This hardwood floor system installs by placing each piece and whacking it with a mallet. It's self-adhesive, comes in exotic woods, and is imported from the Netherlands. If you like this kind of thing, also check out Swedish wood flooring from Kahrs International, Inc., in Hayward, Calif.

Best muck to spread on a leaky roof goes to Oregon Research and Development Corp. (Salem, Ore.) for its Roof Guardian paint-on roof restorer. **Classiest up-scale shingle** goes to Prestige copper-faced asphalt shingles from Italy (imported by Decoplast International Ltd., Hamstead, N.Y.)

Finest bathroom widget award goes to Shower Star, a shower head that lights up from energy generated by the water running through the shower head (O'Ryan Industries, Vancouver, Wash.).

The special **bathbubs-for-the-rich-and-famous award** goes to the Aqua Swim 'n' Spa. This 18-foot-long hot-and-cold tub lets you swim in-place against the current on the cold end, then soak and swirl in the hot end. (Pool Technology, Ltd., Port Brownsville, Texas). My order's already placed, but it's going to be tough getting it up the stairs.

And finally... **Best new song to promote a building product** goes to: "Get the Jamb-Jack, and it won't come loose no more, no more, no more, no more." Sung to the tune of "Hit the Road Jack," this was part of Pease Industry's show-girl act to promote its adjustable jamb and new pre-hung wood door.

There was much more, ranging from the sublime (jazz musician Lionel Hampton jamming for the Edison Electric Institute) to the ridiculous (dummies dropping head-first into Vikrell bathtubs). But it's also the most intensive, densely packed information source you'll tend in this industry. Next year, the show moves to Atlanta for a three-year stint.

—Steven Bliss