

## Radon Ready

To the Editor:

I agree with the recommendations made in the article "Radon Vent Retrofit" (12/01) and have been incorporating a passive vent radon pipe into all new homes and condominiums we build in southern Maine, regardless of soil conditions. We have the plumbing contractor run the vent pipe during plumbing rough-in and have found that the additional cost per unit is minimal and the savings is significant if an active system is needed after the building is completed.

All of our structures are built with crushed stone under the basement slab and a continuous polyethylene vapor barrier to facilitate ventilation. We build in all soil conditions, from blasted ledge sites to sandy coastal areas and have found elevated radon levels in all types of natural soil conditions. This has led me to wonder whether "outgassing" from concrete foundation aggregate and from the crushed stone under the foundation is a significant contributor to the problem. The stone used in both of these instances is manufactured locally from crushing ledge and quarried rock. If fissures in this rock naturally release radon gasses, isn't it logical to conclude that crushing the rock and creating millions of exposed surfaces would also release radon gas? If this is in fact happening, is it likely that the elevated radon levels might be temporary in a new home and dissipate over a relatively short period of time? I have never seen any information or studies on this issue and would be interested to hear about any data that might address the question.

James E. Van Wyck  
via e-mail

*Robert Stilwell, radon coordinator for the State of Maine Radiation Control Program, responds: Much of the bedrock in Maine contains some uranium, so it's quite possible that the crushed stone you use is con-*

*tributing some radon to the elevated levels you've measured. But if the radon venting system is operating correctly, it doesn't matter what the source of the radon is, since it will be vented harmlessly into the atmosphere. It definitely won't dissipate over a relatively short period of time, though: The half-life of the uranium in the rock — which breaks down to form radon — is about 4.5 billion years.*

*Incidentally, the State of Maine regulates all radon-control work, so anyone performing it should be sure that they're meeting state standards. For more information, contact the Maine Radiation Control Program at 800/232-0842 in state or 207/287-5698 out of state.*

## Mold Warning

To the Editor:

Regarding the article "A Closer Look at the *Stachybotrys* Scare" (Notebook, 12/01), I regret being quoted in a manner that ascribes to me an unbalanced view. While it is true that I regret scary news articles when they fan public fear, in my conversation with *JLC* I emphasized that serious health problems may sometimes be caused or aggravated by a variety of allergenic or toxic mold species when they are found inside buildings.

The "phobia" quote attributed to me omitted the rest of my comments and may make it appear to *JLC* readers that I do not take indoor air contaminants seriously. Since detection, diagnosis, and laboratory analysis of indoor contaminants such as mold are my full-time occupation and study, I would like to add this clarification of the risks.

In addition to cases of inappropriate public fear and cases of poor construction that increase the risk of mold problems, there is a serious problem with invalid testing, with current marketing of highly questionable "home test kits," and with services offered by some "inspectors" who know too little about mold and its associated health risks and too much about making a buck.

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## Letters

Inspectors who perform a superficial test and identify "*Stachybotrys*" on 4 square inches of damp basement dry-wall may be doing a serious disservice to their clients if, for example, at the same time they fail to notice, test, and report a 50-square-foot toxic mold colony of *Aspergillus niger* in the living area. The latter is a light-colored mold that is more difficult to see than the now infamous *Stachybotrys chartarum*. Inspections need to be thorough and competent; lab work needs to be diligent and careful to look for and report more than that which pops up at the first attempt to focus the microscope; and diagnosticians need to listen carefully to people's complaints even when the complaint or behavior seems weird.

The article also failed to quote my urgent warning to builders who specialize in renovation and remodeling. These specialists are often asked to clean up and renovate very moldy areas. In addition to health risks to building occupants and risks of conta-

mination of other areas of the building, I emphasized that remodeling contractors need to recognize conditions that may be a health hazard to workers themselves, and to take appropriate measures to protect workers and occupants alike. Repeated exposure to demolition materials, if they are contaminated with allergenic or toxic mold spores (or other contaminants such as asbestos), can increase worker susceptibility to asthma or worse, and may lead to serious infections of lung, eye, or other organs. An electrician who called my mold testing lab offered this scary experience: He was drilling overhead up through a subfloor that was coated with a toxic mold when a chip of moldy wood fell into his eye. Not realizing the risks, he simply removed the wood chip. I suspect his subsequent eye infection was not properly diagnosed and treated. In any case, he has completely and permanently lost vision in the injured eye. Workers in such environments

### We'd Like Your Help

To help JLC stay in touch with our readers and thereby serve you better in the years ahead, we are assembling a reader advisory board — a panel of subscribers who are willing to spend one hour three times a year to fill in a survey of no more than a few pages. Topics will include business management, job-site practices, product and material use, and tool preferences. Survey results will be published in JLC for the benefit of all readers. We hope members will stick around for at least one year, but no time commitment is required.

Beyond the three surveys, a JLC editor may occasionally contact you for additional information in the course of a year, by whatever means is convenient for you (e-mail, post, fax, phone). If you're too busy at the time to respond or don't wish to share your thoughts, no problem. We understand the value of your time and respect your privacy. Finally, the names of the panel readers will be held by the JLC editorial department alone and will not be shared with any other group or organization.

If you are a JLC subscriber and a professional builder or remodeler and are interested in serving on the JLC reader panel — the JLC Board — please respond by e-mail to [djackson@hanley-wood.com](mailto:djackson@hanley-wood.com) or fax to 802/879-9384. Be sure to include "JLC Board" as part of the message header. Or you may mail to The JLC Board, 186 Allen Brook Lane, Williston, VT 05495. Include your name, address, business name (letterhead where possible), and an e-mail address and fax number if available. We look forward to hearing from you.

Don Jackson  
JLC Editor

## Letters

need the advice of a professional who is familiar with mold and other air contaminants. Wear eye protection; wear a HEPA-filter respirator. Forget paper dust masks for high-risk areas.

For in-depth information about mold risks, mold testing, and mold remediation, visit [www.inspect-ny.com](http://www.inspect-ny.com).

Daniel Friedman  
Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

### Getting a Fair Markup

To the Editor:

I have been in construction here in California since 1969 and a licensed general contractor since 1976. Every month I look forward to your magazine because of the practical tips you have for me or my subcontractors.

However, I am a little puzzled by a comment made by David Mecherly of Carpentry Services in the article "Charging for Estimates" (10/01). He indicates that he marks everything up by at least 75%. I would love to be able to do the same thing, but with so many large building supply chain stores around, it seems that many of my clients are as knowledgeable about material costs as I am. They often react with shock when I explain to them that I must mark everything up even 15%. I would like a little more insight into this practice.

Bill Loar  
William Loar Construction  
Paso Robles, Calif.

*David Mecherly responds: We do in fact mark everything up 75% at the outset of the estimating process, but it usually falls somewhere between 50% and 55% by the time we go to contract. The good thing is that the trend is upward — we used to be lucky to end up with 30%.*

*To put this into perspective for Bill Loar, it's important to understand that we do not compete with the big box stores. We are a small company specializing in \$25,000 to \$150,000 custom remodeling projects. Rather than the prospective customer screening us, we screen the prospects;*

*most never get past the first phone call. If price is their top priority, we end the conversation. We also excuse ourselves from competitive bidding exercises. Our motto is "Creating special spaces out of ordinary places." Our customers tend to be adventurous and have typically interviewed a number of other companies before they come to us. The other companies generally turned down the jobs, were not enthusiastic, or were not qualified to do the jobs.*

*Before starting my own company, I was a project manager for a nationally respected high-end remodeling company. We generally did jobs in the \$250,000 to \$750,000 price range. The owner had the artistic touch; he was a great designer. But he never screened his customers and often bowed to their demands to cut his costs. We lost as much as \$50,000 on some jobs. Needless to say, the owner went bankrupt — and I learned an important lesson.*

*Our company will grow only to the extent that we can find customers with whom we want to work. This is a marketing issue, which we are currently addressing with a redesigned corporate image and website, to be followed by a long-term advertising campaign inviting our target audience to visit our website. Best of all, this is all being done by professionals; we did it ourselves the first time and ended up with what we paid for: very little.*

*In a nutshell, we run our business unlike that of many builders; fortunately, it looks like we are headed in the right direction and are anticipating growth during the next year.*

### Installing Clad Windows

To the Editor:

In your article on clad-wood windows (10/01), you remarked that Andersen's 400 series window came with several nails left proud, and that customer service told you that was an oversight. I just finished a home with over \$40,000 worth of Andersen's 400 series casement windows, and virtually every window had the same oversight. The units that did not have this prob-

lem came with another — the moldings were not nailed at all. Checking each molding to see if it was adequately nailed, setting all the exposed nails, as well as installing extension jambs, kept two trim carpenters busy for almost two days. The result was more expensive compared to the competition, which comes completely finished and ready for paint or stain.

Mark Ogland-Hand  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

*After the article was published, an Andersen representative called to tell us that, contrary to what customer service had said, those nails are left proud on purpose — a technique they call "soft-nailing," which requires the finish carpenter to set the nails in the field. As for extensions, Andersen attaches their 4<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub>-inch jambs but ships 6<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub>-inch extensions loose. In comparing Andersen windows to the competition, it's important to factor in the extra trim carpentry time, which we mentioned in the article.*

—The Editors

### Romex & Strapping

To the Editor:

As a footnote to the Q&A on installing wiring between ceiling strapping (*On the House*, 12/01), a check of the amendments to the *Massachusetts Electrical Code* shows that section 300.4(d) — referenced in the author's answer — has been deleted. I see this type of installation constantly, and under the *Massachusetts State Electrical Code* it is perfectly acceptable.

Chris Clemente  
via e-mail

### KEEP 'EM COMING!

Letters 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, 186 Allen Brook Ln., Williston, VT 05495; or e-mail to [jlc-editorial@hanley-wood.com](mailto:jlc-editorial@hanley-wood.com).