

Rather Not Tile Over Laminate

To the Editor:

Regarding the article "Tiling Over a Laminate Countertop" (3/03): How much time and money are saved by tiling over laminate tops? At that stage of demolition, pulling the laminate tops and replacing them with a CDX plywood base not only gives you a more predictable surface to work from, but allows you to strengthen the base cabinets if needed, as well. It also gives you the freedom to change the sink size and configuration. The value and long-term durability of this approach far outweighs the benefits of tiling over an existing laminate surface.

Mitch Maggetti
Maggetti Construction Inc.
San Jose, Calif.

Decking Tips

To the Editor:

We enjoyed the Milwaukee *JLC* Live show. Here's a tip for deck builders to help lay a tight, straight deck faster.

We build with very wet deck lumber here in southern Wisconsin. When we lay the deck boards, we fasten the first one to the straightened end joist where we want to start the run. Next, we prepare and lay out 19 or 20 5/4x6 boards, lining up the ends against the building. None are fastened yet. We

use two 10-foot-long, 3/4-inch black iron pipe clamps to squeeze all of the deck boards tight together. We place the clamps one-fourth of the board length from the ends, checking the finished end for alignment and measuring at the clamps to be sure the courses are staying



parallel. The ends of most deck boards are narrower than the middle from drying out, so clamping at the ends would create a bulge in the middle.

It's okay to have some gaps at the ends of the boards. We double-check the measurements and add clamps if necessary. We then snap lines for the screws, predrill, and screw. We leave the fourth board from the far end loose and pull it out when we advance the clamps. We may also leave the unfinished ends loose if this is a joist that will need to be straightened later.

We lay the next set of boards, 17 plus the 3 from the first set that we tighten the clamp against, and repeat the procedure. At unfinished edges of the deck, we snap a line, cut off the waste, and straighten the joist before screwing into place. This method works on diagonally laid decks, also.

The photo below shows a clamp at the end of the deck boards to bring the last board flush at the far edge of the deck.

Dave Karr
Dream Builders
Beloit, Wisc.

Solar Incentives

To the Editor:

Regarding the item "New Incentives Spark Solar Electric Resurgence" (*In the News*, 5/03), while incentive programs in various states, especially California, have indeed led to relatively large increases in sales and installations of photovoltaic (PV) panels in the U.S. in recent years, the federal income tax credits for residential solar systems expired in 1985, not 1980. Nearly all of the solar systems installed during the late '70s and early '80s, for which the owners took advantage of those tax credits, were solar thermal systems used for heating water and for space heating. Data

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www.jlconline.com

Mailing Address:

The Journal of Light Construction

186 Allen Brook Lane

Williston, VT 05495

802/879-3335

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Letters

collected by the DOE's Energy Information Administration (EIA) indicates that sales of solar thermal collectors for residential applications in 1986 were about a quarter of what they were in 1984. Shipments of PV cells for sale in the U.S. dropped by about 30% in 1986 relative to shipments in 1985. It's difficult to say whether that decrease is entirely attributable to the expiration of the tax credit, since many PV cells and panels are not used in residential applications. Shipments of solar thermal collectors for residential applications have remained fairly flat since 1986, while domestic shipments of PV cells have steadily increased since then.

Another source of information on incentives for solar systems in the U.S. is the "Database of State Incentives for Renewable Energy," which is available on the web at www.dsireusa.org. Your readers may also be interested in the free publication "A Consumer's Guide to Buying a Solar Electric System," which is available on the web at www.eere.energy.gov/consumerinfo/factsheet.html or from the EREC by calling 800/363-3732.

Thanks for the opportunity to provide some clarification.

Paul Hesse
Energy Efficiency and Renewable
Energy Clearinghouse (EREC)
U.S. Department of Energy

Not As Easy As It Looks on TV

To the Editor:

It seems to me that the airwaves have become congested with do-it-yourself radio and television shows. This trend is having a profound effect on the residential construction industry and I'm sure the insurance industry as well. Many do-it-yourself renovations are substandard and a nightmare for the next homeowner. How much are these substandard renovations cost-

ing insurance companies?

While it is true that some homeowners are handy — even very handy — they are not professional tradespeople. DIY programs often use rating systems to express the difficulty of a particular project. These ratings can lead a homeowner to think that a renovation is easy. As a small contractor, we receive several calls each week from panic-stricken homeowners whose renovations have gone wrong. What can they expect when their apprenticeship has consisted of an hour-long seminar at a box store?

We are among several contractors we know of who charge an estimate or consultation fee. It used to be that our "free estimates" were turning out to be "get free ideas" sessions for the DIYers. We often wasted six or seven hours between the home visit and pricing and writing the quotations. No more.

I think that we need to do more to educate the public on what a qualified tradesperson actual is. They have no idea of the years spent apprenticing. My father-in-law has been a finishing carpenter for 56 years and tells me that he stills learns something new every day.

Sandy Scapillati
Queensway Tile & Marble
Ottawa, Ont.

Masonry Innovation

To the Editor:

I was very happy to see that an American mason contractor is finally doing what has been done in Germany for years ("A Masonry Chimney in Six Hours," 6/03). It is ironic that this is happening after I have retired from the GC business. I would recommend that every mason and concrete contractor spend a week looking at what the contractors do in Germany. There is still a lot of handwork but also a lot of specialized equipment that makes

masonry work faster and easier. If you are a framer, stay home: Almost all homes are masonry.

C. W. Caldwell
via e-mail

Corrosion Exfoliation

To the Editor:

I was impressed with the ingenuity of Rick Rossi and Keith Knickerbocker, who came up with the innovative precast concrete chimney system ("A Masonry Chimney in Six Hours," 6/03). One minor quibble: The authors appear to embed aluminum flashing in a mortar joint of the chimney. Aluminum in contact with concrete or mortar will react with the alkali hydroxides in the cement to cause expansive corrosion of the aluminum. This is likely to result in the long-term failure of the flashing, and the corrosion exfoliation may force the joint to widen. Copper is virtually inert with respect to concrete and mortar and would be a much better flashing material for a long-lived installation.

Carl Mezoff, P.E.
Stamford, Conn.

Less Bravado

To the Editor:

Despite the water and air infiltration testing that every door and window at Pella goes through, according to Chuck Kaskiewicz of Pella (*Letters*, 6/03), I had a Pella sliding door that leaked at the upper miters a dozen years ago. It damaged the homeowner's hardwood floors, and Pella paid quite a bit to have them refinished. The fix involved flashing that covered the headpiece of the door and the miters. So why not less bravado and accept the possibility of imperfection in even the best of products by making allowance for the possibility of leakage, as Joe Lstiburek recommends?

Bob Jordan
via e-mail

Letters

Hats Off to Reusers

To the Editor:

My hat is off to Mr. Criner and Mr. Stemler and all others like them ("Time to Clean the Garage? Head to the ReStore," *In the News*, 4/03). Starting a surplus and salvage store for construction materials is an exceptional idea.

John Walden
Sustainable Energy Program
National Center for
Appropriate Technology
Butte, Mont.

ANSI Spec Is Helpful

To the Editor:

I really enjoy your magazine and the many good problem-solving tips it offers. However, in the article "New Water Heater Standard Will Save Lives" (*In the News*, 6/03), you say there is a new ANSI standard, but you didn't give it. The number would have helped. I want to be sure when I

purchase one in the near future that I do have the most current ANSI number and to see if the manufacturer says he meets it or not. I'm sure the salesman won't have the slightest idea. Thanks.

R. Jary
Fort Worth, Texas

Ted Cushman responds: You raise a good point. The existing stock of water heaters manufactured without the new spark-arrest technology can still be sold and installed until the inventory is used up, so you can't assume a unit on the shelf complies with the new rule. The new standard designation is "NSI Z21.10.1-2001." Note also that the rule revision applies only to atmospherically vented units for now. Power-vented water heaters won't come under the new standard until July 1, 2004, and commercial models don't have to comply until July 1, 2005.

Oversight

We failed to mention that the article "Poor Man's HRV" (*Backfill*, 6/03) was adapted with permission from an article that first appeared in *Energy Design Update* (800/638-8437 for subscription information).

— The Editors

KEEP 'EM COMING!

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