



Photos by Rick Mills

# Practice Makes Perfect

BY RICK MILLS

**“Let’s mock it up”** is a catchphrase often used at Jackson Andrews Building + Design (JABD), where I work as a project manager. That’s because we’ve found that it’s easier for clients to understand a building detail or a final product by looking at a full-scale mock-up than by trying to decipher an architectural drawing. The problem we kept facing is that, without this visual aid, our clients often lacked confidence in their decisions and final selections.

We were first prompted to use this approach during a site meeting for one of JABD’s first renovations, when a client looking at the drawings for interior columns and archways was having difficulty picturing what the architect had envisioned. This left us with two choices. The first was to explain to the client that we were at a stand-still until she could decide what she wanted to do; unfortunately, if she didn’t like it afterwards, we could redo it but would have to charge a fee. Our second option was to grab some scrap material and quickly assemble half of the column, which would allow us to show her what the dimensions and profile would be in full scale. We knew the costs involved to do this were minimal, while the clarity it would provide our client would potentially save more time in the end. This approach would also give the client reassurance that she wasn’t committing to a building detail she might not like and potentially would have to pay an additional amount to redo.

It worked like a charm. The client felt confident with the design and knew exactly what the finished product would be; the carpenter knew that—as long as he followed the mock-up—he would only have to do it once; and JABD now had a hard sample that all involved—contractor, carpenter, and client—were accountable to.

From that point on, mock-ups have become an essential part of our selections process. One simple example is the time we turned an entire wall into a paint sample, giving our client plenty of time to examine the color in different light. Another time, we installed a few square feet of a chosen tile, but with different grout colors (1). We often quickly trim out a couple of windows with different interior and exterior casing details so clients can see how the profiles look in real life and compare them (2, 3). We worked on a much larger scale on another project, erecting a 3,000-square-foot full-size walk-through portion of a new home that we were about to build. No matter the size, each mock-up serves the same purpose: to provide the client with enough detail to feel confident about their selection and avoid re-dos.

Recently, we discovered another benefit to our mock-ups:

It’s easier to choose grout colors from a sample than from a color chart (1). Before drywall installation, interior (2) and exterior (3) trim options can be mocked up. Selecting siding color is also easier when it’s seen in natural light.



This small structure started out as a jobsite office (4) but soon became a perfect place to test different combinations of windows and claddings, including a thin adhered stone veneer in various colors and a rainscreen cladding system (5).



installation verification. After evaluating the schedule for an upcoming project, we decided to build a small, on-site office. Our intent was to keep it simple and dried in, but it didn't take long to realize we had just constructed the perfect mock-up scenario: a shell that could not only receive different exterior wall claddings, windows, stone facade design, cornice details, and roofing but also serve as a testing platform for the installation of each component (4).

As design and selection ideas for the project progressed, so did our mock-up, which has been crucial not only for the aesthetic evolution of the project but also for the building envelope's design. We have a platform to test the performance and integration of key components of the project, such as the Parklex rainscreen cladding system, flangeless windows, concealed gutters, metal roofing, and more.

Our mock-up also gives our team a chance to "practice" installing new materials with new methods. We've seen this lead to more productivity once we begin the actual installation, because we've had the time to work out unforeseen issues that sometimes arise with unfamiliar products. For example, we've been able to fine-tune the window positioning with the wall cladding panels, which have a double-rail mounting system that creates a nearly 3-inch gap between the face of the sheathing and the exterior face of the cladding (5, 6, 7).

At this writing, the project's foundation is underway, and as we approach the framing stage, we have an architect, a designer, a builder, and—most important—a client who are all confident in the assembly, performance, and aesthetic of the design.

Is our "mini-house" overkill? We don't think so. Like the majority of our clients, the owners don't design and build residences every day, and the choices and questions we present to them can be unfamiliar and challenging. Our approach eases their stress level, and they no longer feel the pressure of "speak now or forever hold your



A full-scale mockup allows clients to visualize the difference between raked and full mortar joints in the stone cladding and the mitered Parklex cladding corner detail (6), and the effect of using a narrower, 4-inch version of the cladding for the soffit (7).







The roof has a wide overhang with a copper-lined hidden gutter (8). The crew tested a standing-seam roof installation over sleepers, rigid foam, and sheathing (9), but the panels deflected even with sleepers installed on 8-inch centers (10). The final decision was to eliminate the foam and separate the panels from the sheathing with a high-temperature underlayment (11).

peace” before making a commitment to any selection. And it gives our trade partners the chance to work out new details, such as the concealed-gutter design (8-11) that we first learned about in *JLC* (“Concealed Gutters for a Modern Lake Home,” Aug/18).

Not every project warrants a “mini-house,” of course. Still, we strongly believe that the only way to fully grasp the real thing is by seeing it, no matter what the appropriate scale is for the project. One of the most important responsibilities we have as a general contractor is to communicate well, both to our clients and to our trade partners. Mock-ups help prevent miscommunication with a

client by taking the guesswork out of what may have been “talked about.” With a trade partner, a mock-up provides a reference point that we can both look to, confirming that our subs are actually building what was approved by the client. No matter the scale of the job, mock-ups create client confidence as the project progresses, leading to a more enjoyable building experience for all involved.

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