

Learning to Talk the Construction Talk

"Mike, I can't figure out how to get a trimmer and king stud in that pony wall without raising the plate, and that's going to throw off your eave and fascia detailing!" Although I knew exactly what the carpenter was talking about, I noticed a puzzled look on my client's face as we looked over the plans. Since I "talk the talk" of construction on a daily basis, it's easy to forget that many owners' limited involvement in construction can leave them with questions and concerns, and without the information to make important decisions.

Creating precise names is a unique human trait. We assign abstract sounds and symbols to the thousands of things and events that visually swirl around us every day. This need for precision leads to a proliferation of technical jargon specific to each profession and activity--whether it be medicine, music or construction.

Actually, most construction lingo is straight forward in that it tends *not* to be multi-syllable, foreign-sounding or completely unfamiliar terminology like that used by doctors or nuclear physicists. Large or complex terms may be critical to being precise, but they can also be used to intimidate (by implying that if you don't know them, you can't make a meaningful contribution). Here are some suggestions to cut through the jargon and at the same time communicate as clearly and precisely as possible.

Symbols

Plans are full of symbols, many of which carry relatively uniform meanings. Electrical duplex plugs, for example, are universally shown as a circle with two strikes through them. Three strikes means 220 volts. Other symbols, such as those for 480 outlets or door bells, may vary from draftsman to draftsman and office to office.

A complete set of plans should include a *symbol schedule* that will allow you to interpret the standards of the office preparing the drawings.

Abbreviations

All drawings are "built by hand," whether computer drafted or manually drawn. No one likes to spell out words like *plywood* over and over again on a set of drawings, so abbreviations are used. However, there are a huge number of variations on ways to abbreviate even a simple term like *plywood*. Some offices use *PW*; we use *PLYWD*. Others use *PWD*. Again, there should be a list of abbreviations in your set of drawings which should cover at least the most commonly used ones. Invariably, however, a few will appear that have been cooked up by a draftsman on the spot. If an abbreviation isn't clear, ask, because your contractor might not know what it means either and a lot of hassle and potential misunderstanding can be avoided!

Words and Phrases

There exists a wonderfully rich body of architectural terminology that extends back hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of years. Words such as *frieze* and *entredos*, *entablature* and *quoin* still play a role in architecture today. You are less likely to hear these phrases on a construction site, however, than at an architect's office. They aren't used often on plans unless current stylistic trends have made them well known. Examples are "*quoins*," the raised blocks simulating masonry at the corners of a building which are popular on Mediterranean style homes. There are some great architectural dictionaries with illustrations available which can make you an expert in this terminology.

Construction Terminology

Studs, plates, hips, valleys, headers, cripple

walls--there are probably two or three

hundred words and phrases in common use in construction and on drawings to describe assemblies, components and materials. Each trade--carpentry, concrete, masonry, etc., has their own language. While many terms are familiar, some have subtle nuances of meaning in different circumstances. Most of these phrases are found in the same dictionaries that treat the classic phrases, although asking is the quickest and most direct way to get a definition.

"Slang" and Regional Construction Terms

Some construction terminology is unique to an area. For example, on the West coast a *hog valley* would be understood by virtually everyone in the industry. On the East coast, however, it would draw blank stares.

defined only by outright asking. If you ask three people and get three different answers, don't be too surprised. It's an indication, however, of a phrase that should be used with extreme caution, if at all.

Gobbledygook

About once a month, I hear something completely new in the field or in the studio. It may be a word cooked up out of thin air to describe some unique circumstance or character: *bunker cabinets, fading retreats, ziplock insulate*. The best of these can bring a laugh, or communicate an idea in a concise way that is innovative. Either way, the language of construction continues to evolve.

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