

SPEAK UP

Communication during your remodeling project -- Part Two

Sometimes it's hard to speak out during your project. Faced with hectic schedules, and the constant struggle to balance time, money, and design, there are times when it seems necessary to shrug your shoulders about a decision. In our last column, I encouraged speaking out - and using your designer or Architect as spokesperson to speak out for you when times seem to make it unwise or impossible to do it yourself. The contractors who read my last column about speaking out are probably saying: "Yipes! Mike going to get our pickiest customers to speak out even more!".

I have to admit there are times when, having heard a complaint about some little detail such as, "Look at the bumpiness on the back side of this panel, behind this piece of trim...", that I sometimes mentally finish the sentence: "In a spot where no one will ever see it and where it would be impossible to produce a smooth finish unless someone spent half a day on their belly with tiny pieces of sand paper or a fingernail file." Sometimes, concern about a detail is out of balance with the overall scope and character of the job or the conditions of the agreement, including budget, time, etc.

Expectations are sometimes difficult to match with practical results. If you use the standard AIA Contract forms for your construction project, the Architect is entrusted with determining what expectations are backed by contract requirements, and which might not be. In making that call, there are a variety of factors to consider.

One is the overall nature of the project scope and caliber. Some finish refinements in carpentry or drywall just don't fit into reasonable expectations in a basement or garage, for example, unless they have been explicitly referenced in the plans.

Other factors are prevailing industry standards. The workmanship skills that are reasonable to expect under normal circumstances are those that are prevalent for the construction type. Unfortunately, that can lead to unmet expectations.

That's been especially true in some trade areas where there is a declining degree of training and craftsmanship. For example, in HVAC systems (heating and air conditioning) the duct work now used in a residence is often flexible plastic tubing that comes prepackaged. This flexible, flimsy duct work can be installed with such little skill that often the people actually executing that portion of the work have little understanding of airflow and the mechanics of how duct systems need to be configured and supported to perform. This can result in flexible ducting that is bent so severely that it is squashed flat, which leads to inadequate air flow.

This type of problem, if buried within the confines of an attic or inside a wall, can be extremely difficult and expensive to correct later, if in fact it is even possible by then to figure out what exactly the problem is. The symptom - no air coming from the register - is obvious enough, but if everything between the air handler and the register is in inaccessible spaces, you have to break out the magic x-ray vision, or start guessing.

Another example is in the walls themselves. A wall may seem like an inherently simple thing but it, like many other things in construction, is actually an assembly of many different pieces and involves the work of different people. There is actually skill involved in creating a seamless and uniform shape and appearance to a wall. The days of wet plaster are gone. The look of wet plaster can still be achieved with modern materials (drywall and taping mud), but this is not the kind of workmanship that prevails in production housing, for example. The

majority of people being trained for that trade get most of their experience applying a relatively rough finish such as skip troweled, or sprayed on, which is almost always inappropriate in an older home. When we specify a simulated plaster finish, we expect a certain uniformity and quality. If there has been no specific requirement in the specifications, however, it won't be assumed that you want to match the rest of the house. What you will probably get is the economical finish that you find in production housing - rough and bumpy, and that may be all you can expect if you didn't require anything specific.

complicated, and subject to interpretation. As you speak up during the course of your project, there will be times when your Architect or Designer can be a valuable resource for keeping things in perspective. After all, they are involved in lots of projects and many different situations, and they can help you evaluate what is realistic and what is just plain unacceptable. What might be standard practice today may be too much to expect in just a few years. It might also be that a new and better way of doing things will allow an even greater degree of expectation to be met.

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