HEARD AT the Show

Highlights from *JLC*'s Construction Business & Technology Conference

More than 6,000 builders and remodelers attended *JLC*'s third annual Construction Business and Technology Conference, held in Providence, R.I., during the last weekend in February. This year's show presented more than 50 technical and business seminars, as well as hands-on computer software training workshops, energy and safety resource rooms, and roundtable discussions on topics ranging from job-costing to lead carpenter training. And in what has become a trademark of CBTC, hands-on Tool Workshops demonstrating stair-building and roof-framing techniques were performed several times daily and broadcast live to monitors throughout the Expo Hall.

New this year were three live Construction Technology Demos, which gave attendees a chance to see firsthand the proper techniques for installing wood I-joists, foam concrete forms, and ceramic tile. In addition, one corner of the Expo floor was devoted to the finals of the Vocational Industrial Clubs of America's cabinetmaking competition.

Best of all, CBTC brought construction company owners and their crews together to swap stories, exchange ideas, and solve problems. Here are some excerpts from several of this year's seminars. (For information about CBTC-West, planned for September 26-28, 1997, in Santa Clara, Calif.).

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Planning for Profitability

According to remodeler Peter Feinmann, profit is more than just the amount of money he puts in his pocket: "Profit is about values." Between the office and the field, Feinmann's Arlington, Mass., company, which specializes in kitchen and bath work, has a staff of ten, "not counting spouses and kids, plus my own family. If I make a decision tomorrow that messes up the way my company runs, that decision is going to affect all of these people who depend upon me."

Feinmann's personal approach to profit has spawned several financial management tools that he uses regularly to make sure he makes the right decisions. Throughout the year, for example, Feinmann keeps track of what percentage of his total income he takes in each month. He can then use last year's data to predict next year's volume. "If I take in, say, $80,000 in January, I divide by the historical percentage for that month, say 7%, and it tells me that I'm on pace to do $1.14 million that year." These calculations are less useful early in

the year, because these are the slowest income months for Feinmann's company. "But the exercise tells me whether or not my business plan aligns with the income that's actually coming in."

Managing Multiple Jobs

Paul Sullivan and John Marsoobian usually have several high-end projects going at once, and the amount of information that has to be handled taxes even the best memory. "It's foolish to assume you will remember to bill the owner for the twelfth window they added or that new door in the basement," says Marsoobian. "No matter how good your memory is, if you're doing six or seven projects at once, you'll forget to bill for some of these items, and the client is probably not going to remind you. So you need to have some kind of system."

For Sullivan Company, one key part of that system is a written work order that does double duty, first as a change order trigger and then as a check against warranty work. When clients ask for additional work, the carpenter on site fills out a simple duplicate form and has the owner sign it. One copy goes to Marsoobian, who keeps it as a record of authorization to proceed with the work; the other goes to Sullivan, who uses it as a reminder to write the change order.

In both cases, however, the key is to get the form into the hands of the homeowner. "Don't worry about wasting paper, trying to fit more than one item on the sheet," cautions Marsoobian. "Anytime the client makes a change, get this form to them quickly, even if it's for just one item. If that means you're going to fill out this form 20 times or more, then that's what it takes to keep the owners from forgetting about the added cost of changes."

Radiant Slab Design and Installation

While discussing several methods of installing radiant heat — including slab-on-grade, thin-slab, and dry methods — Richard Trethewey and John Siegenthaler outlined some simple rules that every contractor should follow to avoid callbacks:

- Never lay tubing closer than 6 inches to any walls or built-ins. This will prevent accidental puncture by nails and reduce the potential for heat loss, especially near an outside wall.
- Never lay tubing under cabinets or appliances. The increased heat will cause food to spoil quickly and cause motors and other equipment (like refrigerator compressors) to work harder.
- Keep tubing 6 inches away from plumbing pipes and fixtures. The heat will soften and melt the wax ring in a closet flange and will dry out traps and drains in the floor.
- A dry system must be well insulated from below. Fiberglass may not do the job, especially if there are several layers of flooring above the tubing, because heat will follow the joist. The solution is to use rigid foam over the bottoms of the joists to prevent a thermal short.
- In a dry system, squeeze a thin bead of caulk into the aluminum tray before laying the pipe. This will increase heat transfer and eliminate noise from expansion and contraction.

Truss Roof Tips & Techniques

Like any engineered material, trusses are fragile, so it's important to control how and where they are dropped at the site. Robert Arnold and Mike Guertin, both of whom have worked with trusses for more than 20 years, have three simple rules when it comes to truss deliveries: "Be there, be there, be there." Arnold and Guertin prefer to have trusses delivered by a boom truck, because the trusses can be gently placed exactly where they want them. (Dump bodies are dangerous, because the truss plates may pop when the trusses hit the ground.)

Storage is also important. If the trusses can't be placed directly on a flat area, the pair recommend immediately restacking the entire load to prevent the trusses from taking on the shape of the ground they're stored on. You should also cut the banding straps; otherwise, the first few trusses may kink out of alignment, rendering them structurally unsound.

When it comes to installation, Arnold and Guertin believe it's much faster and safer to do as much prep work as possible before lifting the trusses onto the roof. "For example, we lay out the ceiling furring while the trusses are still stacked on the ground. This saves us from having to snap lines when the trusses are 8 or 9 feet off the ground, working overhead." To help with alignment during installation, they also mark the location of the inside edge of the bearing wall. "Always measure from the center of the truss," cautions Arnold, "because the tail cuts aren't always perfect."

Arnold and Guertin also mark the top cord for roof sheathing, measuring from the peak down to the longest 4-foot increment. Finally, because trusses may be as much as

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1/2 inch off in length, one end of each truss is marked with crayon or spray paint. The marks help avoid confusion should the truss spin in the air when being craned in place.

"We take the trouble to restack all the trusses so we can do all of this on the ground," explains Arnold. "A stack of 20 trusses takes less than 20 minutes, but it saves much more than that in installation labor."

Audio tapes of most CBTC seminars are available from Cambridge Transcriptions (617/547-5690 or 800/850-5258; fax 617/547-0020).