

Innovative Products

Our annual pick of products designed to help you work smarter, faster, and better

by Patrick McCombe

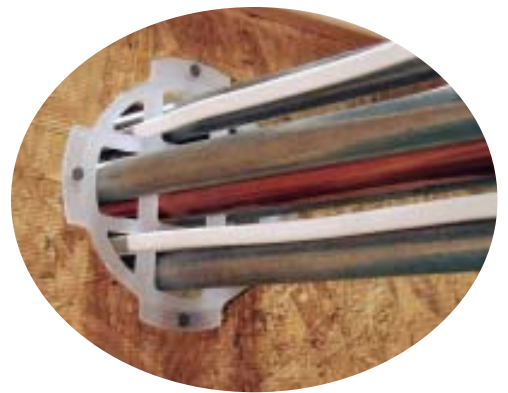
FRAMING & FOUNDATION



Steel Shear Wall

Simpson's new *Steel Strong-Wall* is the strongest, most cost-effective shear wall available today, says the manufacturer, who claims that the product can handle loads two to three times greater than the original Strong-Wall can manage. Thanks to predrilled holes for wiring and pre-attached wood framing, the new Strong-Wall is easier to install than other steel shear panels, too. Simpson also offers templates that practically guarantee your anchor bolts will be in the right locations. Prices for the Steel Strong-Wall — which comes in 12- to 24-inch widths — vary according to size and region.

■ **Simpson Strong-Tie Co.**, 800/999-5099, www.strongtie.com



Line Locator

How would you like to gain greater control over where your plumbers and electricians put their pipes and wires — plus make their jobs easier and faster? The Matrix *Speedline* is a plastic insert designed for use with wood I-joists that allows you to place up to nine pipes and wires in a single 5-inch hole — yet still maintain the code-required spacing between them. To make the hole, Matrix suggests using its 5-inch Xtreme Series Hole Saw (\$100), which the company says can do the job in less than 10 seconds. The Speedline inserts sell for \$2 apiece.

■ **Matrix**, 866/320-5340, www.matrixxtreme.com

Ringer for Stringers

Twenty years ago, you could expect everyone on your crew to have enough skill to make a set of rough stringers; you could also count on your 2x12s being free of splits running down the middle. Unfortunately, you can no longer take either condition for granted — which makes *Easy Risers* from Universal Forest Products a promising alternative to conventional notched stringers. The maker claims Easy Riders are stronger and less likely to squeak than their conventional counterparts. They cost about \$4 each; a pressure-treated version for exterior use is also available.

■ **Universal Forest Products**,
877/872-8639, www.ufpi.com

Sticking with tried-and-true building materials is just good sense. Custom building and remodeling are complicated enough; there's no need to increase your liability by experimenting with every new product that comes along. On the other hand, manufacturers are constantly developing "new" and "better" ways for you to build, and their innovations are worth taking a look at. So, every year, we cull the new-product releases we think most deserve your attention. Some of these are intended to reduce installation time, with an eye toward greater profits. Some address perpetual problems like moisture infiltration or poor indoor air quality. Others simply aim to raise overall quality, so you can demonstrate to your clients your commitment to their comfort and welfare. Inevitably, many of these products are too new to have a long-term performance record — so if you give any of them a try, let us know what you think.

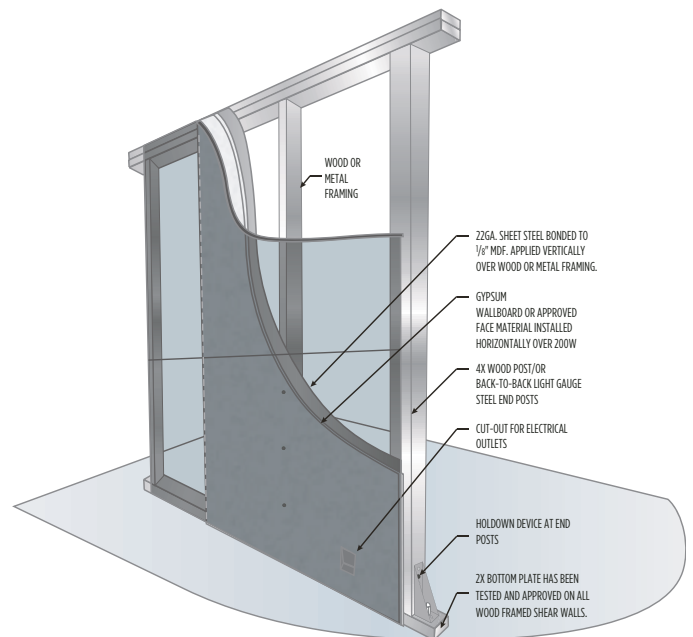


Rot-Free, Rust-Free Timber Treatment

Most new pressure-treatment formulas are more corrosive than CCA, but one promising exception

— *TimberSIL* — won't attack bolts, nails, or hangers, says its maker. The borate-based formula is noncorrosive, fire-retardant, mold-resistant, free of heavy metals, and nonsoluble, making it appropriate for wet locations and ground contact. Currently, two timber treaters — one in Minnesota and one in South Carolina — sell TimberSIL, so distribution might be limited. Still, given the problems with other treatments, I'm betting that consumer demand will lead to nationwide availability within a couple of years. Pricing is comparable to ACQ and copper-azole formulas, says the maker.

■ **Timber Treatment Technologies**, 866/318-9432, www.timbersil.com



Thin-Skinned Shear Panel

Builders working in seismically active areas know all about the complications of conventional shear-wall framing. In many cases, plywood shear panels require special jamb thicknesses, wall furring, and other time-consuming details. Not, however, *Sure-Board 200W*. This 1/8-inch-thick, steel-reinforced MDF panel provides greater shear strength than 1/2-inch plywood and can be used on both the exterior and interior of buildings. Because it's so thin, you can use it under drywall, stucco, and nonstructural sheathing without furring out the rest of the wall. Prices start at about \$1 per square foot.

■ **SureBoard**, 800/775-2362, www.sureboard.com

Self-Flashing Dish Mount

Installing a roof-mounted satellite dish through a four-holed base means that eventually there's going to be a leak in the roof. A better method — one that doesn't rely on the dubious protection provided by blobs of roofing tar — comes from CommDeck, a maker of satellite-mounting systems. The company's newest product, the self-flashing *Retrodeck*, is designed for existing roofs. It accommodates dishes measuring from 18 to 36 inches and sells for about \$35. CommDeck also sells versions for new construction, so that you can make your spec house dish-ready.

■ **CommDeck**, 866/367-7782, www.commdeck.com



Colorful Character

Remember when kids played outside till dusk, people left their doors unlocked, and vinyl siding came in about five shades of white? Well, some things have changed for the better: Alcoa's *DreamColor* siding is now available in more than 700 colors. According to the company, new technology has allowed it to make small batches cost-effectively, so it's no longer limited to the most common (read boring) color choices. Hues coordinate with Alcoa's rain-carrying, decorative-shutter, and vinyl-accessory product lines. The company can also produce custom colors, so you can match existing siding on remodeling projects. *DreamColor* siding costs 10 to 30 percent more than the company's standard siding. Custom color samples cost \$35.

■ **Alcoa**, 800/962-6973, www.alcoahomes.com

Presloped Window Pan

By now, most conscientious builders and remodelers see the value of pan flashings under windows and doors. If you count yourself among the enlightened — actually, even if you don't — check out *Water Out Pan Flashing*. Designed by a professional builder, the presloped flashing doesn't require special PVC adhesive, and, unlike other manufactured pan flashings, it boasts universal corners that work on both the left and right sides of the opening. The company — whose Web site contains several other intelligent flashing products designed for residential construction — says protecting a 3-foot window opening costs about \$10; a 6-foot door opening, about \$15.

■ **Water Out Flashing**, 866/568-0050, www.wateroutflashing.com



Bugproof Exterior MDF

For builders and remodelers working on high-end exteriors, an exterior-rated panel with properties similar to MDF would qualify as a dream come true. You don't have to hide the edges of MDF like you do plywood panels, and it machines and paints beautifully. Attention, dreamers: *Extira*, according to its maker, is the first truly exterior-rated MDF panel. Treated with borates to prevent insect damage and guaranteed for five years, it's available in 4-by-8-foot, 4-by-16-foot, and 2-by-16-foot sheets, in 1/2-, 3/4-, 1-, and 1 1/4-inch thicknesses. A lumberyard in Northern California quoted me a price of \$42 per sheet for twenty 3/4-inch-thick 4-by-8-foot panels. Single sheets were \$48 apiece.

■ **Extira**, 800/255-0785, www.extira.com



Show Them the Door

We ask a lot of exterior doors. They endure dozens of cycles every week and occasional angry slams. They keep out intruders and weather. And they need to look good. It's a tall order — so make sure the ones in your project don't skimp on quality. The Neoporte *Modern Door's* rust- and rot-free stainless steel construction, welded frame, and grade-1 mortise lock should help it withstand tough treatment and harsh environments. At a starting price of almost \$5,200, it's not cheap — but it should last a lifetime and it looks very hip.

■ **Neoporte**, 877/711-2100, www.neoporte.com

Time-Saving Window Trim

Wood casing and a pediment can really jazz up a clad or vinyl window, but painting and installing this trim takes a lot of time and may turn an otherwise maintenance-free window into an ongoing project for the homeowner. Luckily, Advanced TrimWorks makes one-piece cellular PVC *WindowTRIM* and pediments for this very application. A special mounting system eliminates exposed fasteners and allows the trim to move with changes in temperature. Best of all, the whole thing can be installed in 10 minutes. The company says that an "average-sized" window surround with a 2-inch sill and 1-by-4-inch casing (no pediment) sells for about \$150.

■ **Advanced TrimWorks**, 508/822-7745, www.advancedtrimworks.com



Sound Methods

Effective sound control doesn't have to mean complex wall assemblies that are time-consuming and difficult to build. One of the coolest sound-controlling materials I've seen is easily integrated into conventional construction methods — because it's only 1/8 inch thick. With an STC rating of 27, *LV-1* from Sound Sense works significantly better than sound-control batts, and it can be placed under flooring, in ceilings, and behind drywall without creating problems associated with weird wall thicknesses. A 4 1/2-by-30-foot roll sells for \$245.

■ **Sound Sense**, 631/324-2266, www.soundsense.com



Earth-Friendly Wall Finish

Increasingly, homeowners are demanding environmentally responsible products from their builders and remodelers. For these folks, *American Clay* may be just the ticket. This attractive wall finish is made from clay and natural pigments in 32 standard colors and in any custom color. It is appropriate for most interior wall surfaces — excluding showers and other wet locations — and can be applied to many existing wall finishes. The manufacturer's Web site does a good job explaining wall prep and proper application. Expect to pay about \$65 for a 50-pound bag that covers roughly 250 square feet.

■ **American Clay**, 866/404-1634, www.americanclay.com

Cool Long-Lasting Light Strips

Strip lighting is great for brightening dark countertops and highlighting design elements, but the bulbs can make conventional strip fixtures too hot for certain applications. Chill out: Ardee's *Clikstrip LED* uses LED bulbs that stay cool to the touch and consume about one watt of electricity per eight-bulb element. The bulbs last an astounding 60,000 hours, making them perfect for hard-to-reach places; they can also replace other less-efficient incandescent festoon-style bulbs in fixtures from Ardee and other makers. The Clikstrip LED is available in 12- and 24-AC and DC versions and costs about \$30 per eight-bulb element.

■ **Ardee Lighting**, 888/442-7333, www.ardeelighting.com



Cold Shoulder?

Nothing is worse than stretching out for a nice relaxing soak — and then recoiling as your neck touches a freezing-cold tub. MTI's new *Radiance* option removes the chill with radiant heating cables embedded in the tub's backrest and floor. The heating system adds about \$800 to the cost of a single-bather tub and about \$1,600 to that of a twin-soaker model. It can also be installed in the base of shower units, for \$800.

■ MTI, 800/783-8827, www.mtiwhirlpools.com



Choice Flush

You gotta have the right tool for the job — and toilets are no exception. With .8- and 1.6-gallon flush modes, Sterling's dual-flush *Rockton* toilet matches the flush to the task. Using the .8-gallon flush for "light" or liquid waste can save a family of four 6,000 gallons of water per year, says the manufacturer. The toilet's raised-tank design makes cleaning around the seat a cinch. In white, the list price is \$215; colors — biscuit, almond, and ice gray — list for \$300.

■ Sterling, 888/783-7546, www.sterlingplumbing.com

Stout Grout

Epoxy grouts have excellent stain resistance, and they're stronger than portland cement-based grouts, but they can also be hard to work with, especially in hot weather. *Spectralock Pro* from Laticrete is an epoxy grout that the maker claims provides all of the benefits of traditional epoxy grouts, albeit with a longer working time (80 minutes), better hot-weather performance, and no haze. It can be used in a wide range of other applications, too, including narrow-joint and wall installations. Available in 40 colors, *Spectralock Pro* costs about 50 percent more than cement-based grouts — but since it doesn't require a return trip for sealing, the maker claims the price difference is often a wash.

■ Laticrete, 800/243-4788, www.laticrete.com



More Efficient ERV

The best way to guarantee that a home has sufficient fresh air — without wasting energy dollars — is to install an energy-recovery ventilator (ERV). The problem is that most models use permanent split-capacitor motors, which are notoriously inefficient, especially at lower operating speeds. Stirling's *Recouperator 200DX*, however, offers a novel approach. Its electronically commutated, permanent-magnet DC motor and high energy recovery (up to 96 percent) make it the most efficient ERV available, according to *Environmental Building News*, a journal of energy-efficient construction. The variable-speed unit generates 50 to 200 cfm of fresh air; options include HEPA filtration and a monitor that boosts fan speed when it detects higher-than-normal levels of CO₂. Prices start at about \$1,100.

■ **Stirling Technology**, 800/535-3448, www.ultimateair.com



Cooking With Gas

Spurred by the increasing popularity of huge decks and outdoor kitchens, homeowners are installing backyard grills roughly the size of my bedroom closet. These units often require a direct hookup to the home's gas line or to a large LP tank in a remote location. To simplify the connections for users, Maxitrol offers a quick-connecting gas outlet called the *Plug1*. Unlike other quick connects, this system shuts off when excess gas flow indicates a leak or when it detects an unsafe temperature. Many homeowners say it looks better and less scary than other designs. The list price is \$135.

■ **Maxitrol**, 248/356-1400, www.maxitrol.com

Artful Disguise

Cooling large, open floor plans is hard enough without worrying about aesthetics — but the fact remains: Style-conscious homeowners just don't want to look at large air grilles or conventional split AC units.

Luckily, there's a solution: The *Art Cool Air Conditioner's* decorative front panel transforms a drab evaporating unit into a stylish element. Panel styles include reproductions of well-known paintings, realistic wood grains, and high-tech metallic veneers. The split air conditioning unit comes in 9,000-, 12,000-, 14,000-, and 18,000-Btu sizes. Retail prices range from \$1,700 to \$2,600.

■ **LG Electronics**, 800/243-0000, www.lgusa.com



Security Guard

Job-site theft is a big concern these days. While some builders have resorted to planting booby traps or staking out their own job sites at great personal risk, it seems to me that DeWalt's *Sitelock* supplies a safer, more reliable option. This portable wireless alarm uses Cellemetry, a high-speed cellular signal, to call a monitoring station when the alarm is triggered.

Depending on the monitoring service, you'll receive either an automated text or e-mail message, or a phone call from a live operator. Some localities will send law enforcement directly to the site. You can supplement the base unit's built-in motion sensor with up to 48 additional wireless sensors for doors and windows, gang boxes, and other valuable equipment. The base unit sells for \$1,000; additional sensors go for \$99 to \$199 each. Monitoring starts at \$30 per month.

■ DeWalt, 877/748-3562, www.dewalt.com



Van-Storage Solution

If you work out of a van, you know that doing the hunchback routine while you're retrieving tools or building materials can be a real pain — literally. Jemrack's *Van Rack* is a great solution to van storage problems because the swinging organizer deploys in front of the side or rear door opening and then gets out of the way

when you're done using it. Many of the optional accessories are designed for the mechanical trades, but carpenters should consider the *Compartmented Box With Carrier* (left), which looks perfect for fasteners and specialty hardware, and the *Utility Carrier*, for small hand and power tools. With much of

your stuff so easily accessible from the door, you won't have to play Quasimodo every time you need a fitting, fastener, or small tool. The van rack sells for \$335, the compartmented box for \$136, and the utility carrier for \$59.

■ Jemrack Equipment, 608/524-2839, www.jemrack.com



Hole Shooter

A new tool from Stabila speeds up the entire process of drilling a series of carefully aligned holes while maintaining a consistent pitch for waste lines or other pipes. Here's how it works: After the *HL100 Laser Hole Locator* is inserted into the first hole drilled, it projects a laser dot indicating where to drill the next hole. Once that hole is drilled, the tool projects the beam onto the next stud or joist, and so on. It works with holes measuring from 7/8 inch to 4 3/4 inches in diameter and adjusts from perfectly level to slopes of up to 1/4 inch per foot. The HL100 sells for \$250.

■ **Stabila**, 800/869-7460, www.stabila.com



Sole Mates

I learned about foot-puncturing injuries at a young age, when my big brother stepped on a nail-riddled board I left on the ground during my tree-house remodel. He eventually got over it, but not until he had combined my name with every profane word in the book and racked up enough guilt points to last my lifetime. *RhinoTuff Insoles* are designed to prevent this type of injury. The steel insoles resist the 270-pound force specified in ANSI's Z41 standard and, according to Rhino, are the only puncture-resistant insoles endorsed by Cal-OSHA. They sell for \$40 per pair on the company's Web site.

■ **RhinoTuff**, 888/947-4466, www.rhinotuffinc.com



Weatherproof Plan Enclosure

Keeping track of plans and permits on a busy residential site can be a challenge. Many builders hang them on site — which means they'll be missing or trashed in short order. Others store them off site, which keeps them neat and tidy but prevents subs and carpenters from being able to consult them. Doc-Box's plastic enclosures are designed to contain, protect, and display plans and other documents without the pitfalls of other methods. The containers come in several sizes and quality levels; my favorite is the *DB W/L*, a 21-by-27-inch box with a viewing window for posting permits and a large, lockable section for the plans. According to the maker, the container lasts for years and shows inspectors that you're a real pro. It costs about \$50.

■ **Doc-Box**, 800/223-5897, www.docbox.com