A contractor from Illinois was too "challenge challenged" to come up with any drywall job that had ever challenged his skills. "In the Midwest we build square buildings, one story high. The outside is block; inside we throw a few studs in and put up some ceilings. We don't do anything exotic. It's nothing to write home about." If this is really true, maybe the architects need to wake up. Fortunately, no other contractors had trouble coming up with jobs that had given them something to pit their skills, know-how and ingenuity against. Charts A and B (pages 48 and 49) show what they found most challenging, and how they came out on top.

Predictably, it was the complexity of the job, its size or the intricate detail work required that floated the boat of most.

Building for Progressive Collapse

A Californian "brainstormed and figured out how to build something the architect could put on paper but could hardly dimension—a 50-foot diameter cantilever that rose 40 feet into the air in the main lobby of the Apple Computer Training Center. It was
completely dynamic in its architectural design, and we ended up supporting it with metal studs.”

A contractor from Illinois wrapped his wits around “some high-end, trussed condominiums with a lot of detailing and where the ceilings had to float independent of the walls. The very tall, concrete-reinforced building was designed to compress over time. In order to prevent cracking as the building became shortened, the ceiling had to be able to float up and down without hitting the wall line. We used slip joints in all the walls attached to ceilings. We trussed the soffits so they were borne by and move with the walls, rather than being suspended from above.”

An Alabama contractor is working right now on “a huge library that is very mentally challenging with many drops, furdowns and circular walls. All the walls and furdowns are tied together and at the same height without breaks. I’ve assigned the most knowledgeable person as foreman.”

In England, one contractor is “working on a load-bearing steel job that’s going to be the first, four-story ‘progressive collapse’ job in the country-meaning if it fell down, it would go down in stages. All the joints and wall studs have been designed to collapse in a certain fashion.”

**From Chutes to Interstates**

The great detail in the specs is the biggest challenge for others, as this man from Idaho relates: “We’ve been involved with very complex theatre projects and churches that involve lots of radius work with cutting and lay-out issues. We handled it by putting people on the project who have the most experience and ability to get the job done. Having a track-bending tool to form a steel-stud runner channel through a radius certainly has helped.”

A Texan, likewise, has “just finished a couple of jobs with a lot of fancy details in them 30 feet up, with radius conditions and
reveals. We used prefabricated reveals and our better-qualified and experienced carpenters took care of the oddball detail work in making it all come together.”

A Nebraskan “just completed a drywall, fireproofing and EIFS job—a walkway arch over an Interstate. We had to figure out how to build a 360-foot long, 30-foot tall and 50-foot wide walkway on the side of the road that could then be loaded onto oilrig equipment and driven across the interstate without the fireproofing popping off as the steel flexed. We used W.R. Grace material and put lath on all the deck beams first, and it worked.”

When a North Carolinian was given the IBM training center in Atlanta to build, he “found the TV studios there required eight layers of wallboard around them and three different series of studs. The walls also had to be radiused at the bottom so the cameras would not pick up where the floor intersected with the wall, especially at the corners. We figured it out by flexing pieces of poster board and making the angles work.”

An Ohio contractor dealt with “a theatre ceiling that had radiuses and barrels by using hard-won know-how carefully applied.”

A Floridian took his time and didn’t allow himself to become “aggravated by the lack of room to move when hanging the backside of a free-hanging soffit—an indirect light trough with very tight dimensions—and hanging from a cramped mechanical chute or chase.”

**One Tough Operation**

Hospitals present their own challenges, according to a Kentucky contractor, because he has to “maintain the firewall ratings while using every type of drywall. We handle one situation at a time, stocking the correct board for the employee so he doesn’t have to worry about looking at the plans every time he builds a wall.”

An Arkansas contractor finds “hospital work has so much in-wall and above-ceiling construction from other trades that
you have to dovetail with. We deal with it by holding pre-job meetings with the general contractor to coordinate our work in front of the other trades."

“A seven-story hospital was our biggest challenge,” says a Missouri man, “with H-framing, insulation, drywall—all aspects of interior construction, all on a tight time schedule. Key to our success was proper planning, good people, and coordination between the contractor and the supplier.”

Nursing homes are not much different, according to a Floridian. “They are the most challenging because of the code requirements for electrical, plumbing, etc. We deal with them by increasing our unit costs to allow for the extra time needed. Other contractors new to this work only underbid us once before they find out how labor-intensive it is.”

**Big League Builders**

If jobs aren’t complex in the details, they can also be just plain huge and challenging, as this Colorado contractor points out. “We had a constant battle finishing our largest job ever, putting steel and drywall into a casino hotel up in the mountains. It was a structural nightmare of gigantic proportions—20,000 sheets of drywall. We worked outside in the wind and the cold. The engineer had to design the building for 80-mile-an-hour winds, and it’s built like a battleship. It sits on top of another building, so they had to keep the compression from coming right on down through. We used a lot of blocking and heavier-gauge studs.”

“The Arena in downtown Atlanta was a very large job with tight schedules,” says a Georgian, “with a lot of work 60 feet up on scaffolds and lifts.”

For a Maryland contractor, “the World Bank headquarters was a challenge from the standpoint of longevity, being a six-year, $9 million drywall job. The key challenge was keeping everyone interested and maintaining focus.”

“A University of Notre Dame building took 36 semis-full of drywall on a knock-your-socks-off time schedule,” says an Indiana contractor, “at a time when wallboard was in short supply. We stockpiled truckloads of drywall below the Notre Dame football stadium to protect it from the weather.”

**Taking Stock**

Stocking was the issue for another
“We handled it by putting people on the project who have the most experience and ability to get the job done.”

Georgian. “High-rise work is the most challenging because there’s a lot of material, and it’s troublesome getting it to the upper floors. We have to bring in cranes and other heavy equipment and machines.”

A Floridian had a similar problem with “a huge project involving a mall and a 300-unit condominium. Stocking is a problem as we have to carry in all the wallboard—they won’t let us run a fork truck into the building because the sidewalks have already been installed using some special stone that won’t tolerate any weight without cracking. So we have to pay more for stocking and bring the board to the second floor. Our biggest problem right now, though, is we had expected to use lifts through the hole where the escalator is designed to go, to reach some soffits 50 feet up. Now we’re scaffolding it because the escalator has already been installed!”

Another contractor for whom access is proving bothersome works in Colorado. “We’ve had a lot of good challenges, including one where it was hard to access the high atrium ceiling so we could work it safely and efficiently. We ended up creating a scaffold platform 36 feet off the ground that covered the whole area. It was like walking on a floor.

“Sequencing was a real challenge, too, with the owner needing access to parts of the building before we could turn it over, so he could set up equipment and begin
Gaining access to upper floors is a major challenge for many drywall contractors.

Manufacturing on time. We met with the building department and found out what they wanted us to do so the customer could be in the building before they had a Certificate of Occupancy. They wanted the bathrooms done, the hallways fire-rated, and the work area completely isolated so the owner’s people could not venture into our construction area. We ended up building around the employees of the company as they were setting up their equipment.

Mickey Mouse Management

Less well-managed projects can also present a challenge, as the Floridian working on the mall and condominium project found out. “The general contractor and the owner, a New York developer, anticipated everything opening on the same day. When you have 50 stores, half of which haven’t been started yet, they’re not all going to open in two months, especially when the tenant and his contract don’t have a building permit yet. Mickey Mouse Management is what kills you. Dealing with it is the challenge.”

A Nevadan working on a prison has had to “deal with a huge project using incomplete drawings and only finding out details when we were working on site. The process really slowed down as we had to continually consult with the engineers, generate change orders and try to get more money from the owner. It cost us money and we didn’t meet our time frame.”

Getting Cowboys to Cross Their T’s

A common challenge most contractors face is not so much the type of job as finding the skilled labor to do it, as this man from Massachusetts points out. “I was involved in a Nordstrom project once, and they have extremely high standards. It took a lot of project management time and making sure we had laborers and foremen who could take care of all the particulars. Nordstrom had a crew that, once our work was completed, walked around with lights and inspected all the surfaces, noting different angles of lighting and checking for all kinds of defects.

“You won’t find any cowboys signing up to work on a Nordstrom project, which highlights the biggest challenge in drywall or any construction. It is finding
“Mickey Mouse Management is what kills you. Dealing with it is the challenge.”

qualified people who can get things right even under the crunch of time. You rarely have enough time to do an appropriate bid or to do a job properly in the construction industry.

“If you don’t have a good software package, for instance, and you’re under the gun, a less-experienced estimator will throw a number together quickly without always dotting all his I’s and crossing all his T’s. He’ll find there was a page he didn’t look at or some detail, and next thing you know, you’re starting off with a $10,000 deficit to make up.

“With this booming economy, there are a lot of start-up construction companies and many people who don’t really deserve to be in the field. You find yourself dealing with a project manager who isn’t running the job but calling all the subs, yelling at them to get on the job, throwing them on the site, and then just walking away. They’re not qualified to answer technical questions or direct the job so it has a reasonable flow and that costs money.

“I am sure a general contractor would say the same about subs taking on so much work that manpower is an issue, not staffing the job with qualified foreman and journeymen. It goes both ways.”

“Getting the manpower to clean up and convert a dirty, old warehouse into luxurious condos was really challenging,” agrees a contractor from Ontario, Canada. “Few men wanted to work with the 12-foot ceilings when there was so little square footage in the units. We have some really great crews there now, but we were delayed by the lack of manpower.”

A Vermont contractor is of the same mind: “The construction business is made extremely difficult because it is so hard to find skilled people who want to work. It’s almost amusing, listening to new hires saying they can do this and that, and then seeing what they can actually do. Training for construction people is just not happening and yet, at the same time, there is a huge demand.

“Kids are sitting behind computers instead of learning skilled trades. Somebody has to build, and there isn’t anyone out there training them. The unions used to do it, but they have fallen by the wayside. We’ve even thought of setting up an independent facility, but we don’t have the wherewithal or finances to put it together. We’re so busy, anyway, trying to build with the few people we have, that we haven’t the time to think about training. We need a nationwide network of training centers.”

In case the manpower problem seems hopeless, it’s good to remember that America was built by entrepreneurs making things happen, as this Californian demonstrates: “My biggest challenge was starting the business. I had to make the
Cooler Chat

Continuing that idle moment around the cooler, we take a look at the lighter side of work on and off site. This month is devoted to reasons and stories you’ve heard (or could give) for not being on site as expected.

“A spaceship landed on I-5; sorry I am late,” was one of the more bizarre excuses I’ve heard. (Washington)

“When I first started out, I was a one-truck operation with a very shady bunch of characters for crew—when you’re a start-up, you don’t have the pay base to get the quality of help you’d like, and you take whatever everyone else is throwing out.

“They had missed work on Friday, so I still had their paycheck on Monday. I had to shanghai these guys to the job so they would follow me up there and not peel off and get drunk somewhere. We had a problem with our machine so as I was fixing it, I told them to take a break and go to the store. I gave one guy his paycheck and $4 to bring me back a doughnut and tea. They took the money, bought a couple of cases of beer, and that’s the last I saw of them for two weeks. They weren’t a very bright bunch as I still had their paychecks, as well as their hand tools.” (Florida)

“The story that topped the list was the guy who said he couldn’t come to work because he had burned his lip in the sun. I told him ‘I don’t want you to kiss me, I want you to put screws in the walls!’ I should keep a list of the excuses, some of them are very imaginative.” (California)

“One guy drove an hour and a half to get to work and when he arrives, he climbs out of his truck and tells the foreman: ‘I’d really like to work a job closer to where I live.’ The foreman says, ‘I can’t do anything about that right now, but I’ll see if there’s one available and I’ll recommend you for it. Let’s get to work.’ The guy says, ‘No, I think I’ll go home.’ He climbs back into his truck and spends another hour and a half driving home.” (California)

“One guy called in to say he’d been walking his dog. I said, ‘You were out walking your dog?’ He said, ‘Yes, I had him on a leash and a car came by, hit the dog and killed him!’ I replied, ‘Okay, so what’s wrong with you that you can’t come in to work?’ And he says, ‘Well, I had the chain wrapped around my hand and the car drove me down the street with it!’ That guy was something else!” (Alabama)

Email info@words-images.com with the most amusing incident of your career.

Maybe if the same entrepreneurial spirit were applied to training builders in all the trades, we’d have less aggravation trying to find skilled people. We’d have smoother-running projects, and we wouldn’t be heading toward the lowest common denominator of building design and construction.

What if one-story, square construction became the hallmark of American buildings?

About the Author
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