Ask a couple of dozen contractors about their most challenging trim job and how they resolved it, and you’ll hear a bunch of different answers—trim touches many trades. Two themes ran through many of the answers, however (see charts A and B on page 48). Not surprisingly, the more complex jobs present the biggest challenges. Behind that, however, the real challenge today seems to be finding trained and experienced workers to deliver the goods.

The Devil in the Details

For some, such as this contractor from South Carolina, the detail work in general is challenging: “working with fiber-reinforced gypsum and putting together a lot of detailed framing or trim parts—usually around doorways, in lobbies and atriums.”

A contractor from Arkansas recalls a job at “a casino with many different styles of highly detailed trim and different colors, all of which had to be completed in an unreal time frame. It was pretty impossible, but we did it by working our butts off around the clock with several shifts.” Echoing the concerns of several other contractors, he adds, “It was a challenge finding enough qualified personnel.”

Other contractors specified radiuses as the number-one bear: “One large building had an outrageous amount of radiuses that we handled in numerous
ways,” says an Illinois man. “The Radius Track was one of the biggest time savers, especially for those mechanics who weren’t as familiar or adept with framing radiuses.”

“Radiuses,” echoed a Texan. “We usually order special trim bases, usually plastic, which work fine.”

“Reveals are the hardest,” claims a Coloradan. “We deal with them by paying special attention to achieving a true alignment on them.”

A Floridian agrees, saying “We’ve got a few good mechanics kicking around still—they’re a dying breed—and we put them onto reveals when we have them.”

For a Wisconsin contractor, the extra details involved in ornamental cornices are what he loses sleep over. “It’s hard to trim out cornices, to keep the fabric lying down so it doesn’t ball when you put finish on. We lay it out when we’re working with the architect, so we can get large enough details and use standard hand tools to detail it out.”

A contractor from Indiana prefers to handle his cornices with “prefabs, which we do in our own shop.”

**Plug and Play with Prefabs**

Prefabs are what float a Texans boat, too. “We just completed a 13-story building that was full of three- and five-sided aluminum trim and intersections of varying thicknesses and widths. We relied on pre-made intersections and varied the legs of the trims. They typically make a three- and four-way intersection on these trims with a standardized 6-inch leg. Well, we had them make some with 12- and 24-inch legs and particular dimensions or directions that assisted us in minimizing the amount of cuts that we had to do on site, fitting one piece of trim to another.”

A Californian takes the same basic approach: “Right now, we’re doing a project with three 17-story condominiums, each with 32,000 lineal feet of aluminum extrusions, including a drip above all the window heads. I’m having the whole job shipped to me prefabbled; that’s the only way we can do it.”

Attention to detail is how a contractor from North Carolina deals with tricky trim jobs. “We did a department store’s ceilings that had loads of details and drops and whatnot that had to be trained and trimmed out straight. It took a lot of attention to detail, making sure that the whole thing was put in square and straight.”

**The Good Old Days, The Good Old Boys**

When the going gets tough on trim jobs, it may or may not be the tough that get going, but it certainly is the trained and experienced who always come through.

A Washington contractor remembers a job at “an old music hall with lots of off angles, off-shaped walls—I mean, really broken up. The only way to handle it was to get some good, skilled people.” Luckily for him, he had some at that time. “Lathing seems to be a dying industry,” he adds, “and the latherer a dying breed. The kids these days don’t have the well-rounded background that people had 30 years ago, because a lot of it is not done these days. They don’t have the opportunity to practice what they have learned in school.”

Echoing his ideas is a Virginian reminiscing about “all the detail in the plasterwork that we had to patch and fur in a hotel many years ago. Fortunately, we had very experienced plasterers at the time—most have retired since then. “With experienced plasterers being few and far between these days, we make molds for corners and such on a small scale. If we ever get another job as detailed as that hotel, we’ll have to be more involved as managers to make sure the process is taking place properly.”

This lack of experience and applied know-how is not just a problem with plasterers, apparently. “With the job market being extremely busy,” continues the Virginian, “you have general contractors who have less-qualified people on the job, which creates scheduling and other problems. They tell us to do things like spray beams and columns before the roof is on, so other trades can proceed, but it costs us money. In other words, they don’t get the sequences right.”

**Covering Your Butt**

A Georgian has another take on what makes trim trying: It’s when “an interior designer becomes involved and tries to describe to us what he or she wants. They ask us what we recommend. We’re
Along those same lines is a comment from a contractor from Connecticut. “The hardest part about trimming is being the last trade into a site and never having enough time to do our job properly. So we constantly write letters covering ourselves if there are any delays in their schedule. We tell them, ‘If it’s a four-man job, don’t expect us to bring in 40 guys to do it in one-tenth of the time.’ We let them like barbers—if you can show me a picture, I can build it. We’re not in the design business. But any job where we don’t have a clear scope of details that the client wants, has to be the most challenging. It happens often. So we continually ask for everything in writing, for drawings that make us comfortable we have a clear understanding of what the customer wants. Or if there are going to be change orders, we let the customer know that without anything in writing we’ll have to charge him for the time for all the exploratory work.”
Cooler Chat

Continuing that idle moment around the cooler, we take a look at the lighter side of work on and off site. Toilet humor usually finds its way into stories and jokes after a while, so let’s get ours over with right now. While being a vital part of the jobsite, the Port-o-John/Port-o-let also seems to be a standing invitation for some folks to commit a little mischief.

“I thought the person in one of the outhouses was one of my workers who often spends a lot of time in there. I took a bungee cord and wrapped it around the outhouse while spouting some expletives. Then my employees and I sat back and threw rocks, yelled and generally harassed the outhouse. Finally, somebody let the guy out. It was the owner of the building and was he mad! He had some choice words to say. It was very embarrassing for me but my employees got a big laugh at my expense.” (Oregon)

“When I first started in the business, I hooked up a little cherry picker crane to the Port-o-let and picked it up, thinking it was one of my peers in there. It turned out to be my new boss. He fired me and sent me home but hired me back that afternoon.” (North Carolina)

“We were on the 38th floor of a building on a pretty windy day when a guy climbed into the Port-o-let. There wasn’t any real problem until he stood up again. We all saw it going over in slow motion as a gust caught it. It went “flap” and everything went everywhere!

“Another time, we were in a high-rise and it became evident that someone was stealing lunches. So we got a container of pudding and fixed it with a laxative. We left it sitting around and hung around by the Port-o-let. Although the pudding disappeared, we never did catch the guy.” (Texas)

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

know this may not work, but it sure gets the discussion going.”

From Soffits to Staircases

Other problem areas contractors experience include “soffit trim for lighting or light bulbs,” according to a Minnesotan. “We bend or shape the metal so we can drywall over it.”

“Complex staircases,” had a Missouri contractor climbing the walls, and an Oregonian was impressed with “a building that had some curved control joints on it. We handled it by using terrazzo-type zinc control joints and hand-forming them. We had to look beyond the usual suppliers in town and finally tracked down what would work in New York”

From Ontario, Canada, we hear of a job that involved “an arched ceiling that was supposed to be like clouds up in the sky. We built the dome shape using mesh and then an artist painted it so that it looked like clouds. It was really wonderful.”

A contractor in England says he may as well have been in the clouds on the job he just completed, “the conversion of a tobacco factory into prestigious apartments. We did a lot of fancy work on the many box ceilings within the atrium. The ceiling was a good 100 feet up, so getting the men and equipment up there was quite a challenge. They had to lie on their backs to do the job because of the way the scaffolding was set up.”

Speaking for those many jobsites that present little challenge but make up the bread and butter of the trade, a Tennessee contractor says, “our work is all pretty basic. When you’re trimming doors, that’s pretty much all there is to it.”

Which raises this question: Is the lack of trained personnel putting architects and owners off specifying ornate work, or is there a lack of demand for complex jobs resulting in no opportunity for new blood to learn how to deliver the goods? Or are prefabs making skilled work redundant?

Whatever the answer, maybe it’s time the hard-won know-how is passed on before the few who have it pass on themselves.

About the Author

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