

# What Makes a Good Carpenter?



Carpentry is more complicated than it might seem. Sure, the standards of plumb, level, and square are absolute. And most of us know a tight joint when we see one. But those easily measured standards aren't the whole picture. Underlying plumb, level, and square is structural soundness. In years past, that was ensured by institutional memory and the integrity of the builder. Good carpenters got it right. Bad ones didn't.

Today, codes have largely replaced experience and integrity as guidelines for carpenters. At that, most carpenters I know think less about the code than about "what the inspector wants." One dangerous consequence of going from depending on personal experience and judgment to depending on a set of imposed regulations is that it's easy to think there's no structural consideration beyond what the inspector says.

I've seen some apparently wonderful work — railings, for example, with newels plumb and lined, balusters perfectly spaced, tops flat as the horizon at sea. Clearly, the maker knew a thing or two about his craft. But below the deck, the posts were notched halfway through and bolted only to the rim. Back in the May/June 2007 issue, *PDB* excerpted an article from *JLC* about proper newel attachment based

on testing done at Virginia Tech (*Question & Answer*, [deckmagazine.com/article/37.html](http://deckmagazine.com/article/37.html)). The researchers concluded, in part, that 4x4 newels installed as in my tale didn't come close to meeting the IRC's side load requirement. However, the inspector who looked at that deck had no problem with those notched

posts. In my experience, most wouldn't have.

Another example is an otherwise beautifully executed deck stair whose stringers' bottom level cuts were unsupported for 6 inches behind a landing. If such a stringer cracks at the bottom notch, the stair is coming down. It passed inspection. Two years ago I spoke with a carpenter who'd been building decks with bright, ungalvanized nails and hardware since 2004. He'd heard that with the elimination of CCA, the electro-galvanized nails and hangers he had been using were no longer allowed. His work passed inspection.

I have nothing but respect for most inspectors. They do a tough job, and they can be great resources. But it's still the carpenter's job to build correctly. The carpenters who built the decks I've talked about here didn't think they were doing anything wrong. Judging by the look of their jobs, they take pride in their work. But they counted on the inspectors to find their errors, and the inspectors didn't. Maybe they were too busy to look closely, maybe they just missed the problems, maybe they were giving the carpenters a break. In the end, it is the carpenters, not the inspectors, who are responsible for the work.

That takes us right back to the idea of internal standards and integrity. It is incumbent on carpenters to know their trade. But we all get some things wrong. One difference between good carpenters and poor ones is that good carpenters face their mistakes and learn from them. That's hard to do. But as Tom Hanks' character says in *A League of Their Own*, "It's supposed to be hard ... The hard is what makes it great." Good carpenters don't stop looking for better ways to do their job. They don't think that 10 years in the field, or 40, has taught them all there is to know. I like to think that's the kind of carpenter who reads this magazine.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Engel".

Andy Engel  
Editor

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