

How to Explain a Level 5

[BY DONALD E. SMITH, CCS]

May has always been a busy travel month for me and this year is no exception. I have just returned from a trip to the City of Brotherly Love where AWCI conducted two seminars in its Doing It Right series. Both were very well received. The Gypsum—Doing It Right session provided the inspiration for this month's column. This is also a follow-up on a recent column about finishing and decorating drywall.

Our primary instructor was Jason Fell recently retired from the Drywall Information Trust and now working as a consultant in Northern California provided some excellent information on how to handle the expectations of the owner and architect when it comes to a Level 5 finish. Since our Doing It Right programs are based on the requirements of the governing codes and standards—information that is readily available, it's just a matter of knowing where to find the information when you need it. As you may be aware, there are two major factors governing the outcome of a Level 5 finish. One is controllable, and the other is not. The controllable factor is the primer or sealer applied by the painter. The other factor is critical light, especially if it is natural light. Natural light is a moveable feast; it does not occur at the same time of day. The artificial lighting built into the building can be adjusted if the situation is discovered early in the project and the necessary changes are made to correct undesirable situations.

How do you determine when critical light will be a potential problem? It's a matter of looking at the drawings and being aware of those areas that will be affected. These are primarily areas with large expanses of glass that bring natural light into the building and wash over large areas of walls and ceilings at an oblique angle. When this happens, every imperfection in the wall and ceiling will be very apparent if only for a few min-

utes each day. The same will occur when artificial light is used and the light washes the wall at an oblique angle. Brian Healey, general superintendent with Dayton Walls & Ceilings, commented during the seminar that his company always reviews the drawings very closely to determine if there will be areas of critical and then makes suggestions on how to handle the situation. The owner does not always want to go to the added cost of a Level 5, but they are given the choice to do so if a Level 5 has not been specified.

Jason Fell suggested that everyone should have the following information at their fingertips when dealing with a Level 5 finish. You might want to put this information on an index card and keep it in your pocket

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or on your laptop. The items below come directly from ASTM C840, *Standard Specification for Application and Finishing of Gypsum Board*.

Fell's Tips for a Successful Level 5

- A “skim coat” will not approximate a plastered surface.
- Once the skim coat dries, the gypsum board paper may show through, and the treated joints, filled voids and spotted fasteners will likely be visible.
- A skim coat of joint compound is intended to conceal small imperfections in joints and on the surface of the gypsum board, smooth the texture of the paper, minimize differences in surface

porosity, and create a more uniform surface to which the final decoration can be applied.

- A “skim coat” is essentially a “film” of joint compound and is not a readily measurable thickness. There is no specific mil thickness that constitutes a proper “skim coat.”

The following, while not a part of C840, are also useful to pass along:

- A Level 5 creates the “illusion of” a factory-applied finish.
- Build a sample panel and have the architect and contractor sign off on the sample before work begins. Include in the sample panel trim pieces and accessories, the specified finish and sample of penetrations that will occur in the building.
- Remind the architect and owner that drywall is the process of assembling several different items in the field by a skilled craftsman with the end result being “creating the illusion of a factory-applied finish.”

My additional comment to Jason's tips is to expand on the need for a sample panel. If the project is large enough, you could set aside an appropriately sized and configured room that would be the sample panel where the majority of the conditions encountered in the project would be covered. I know a sample panel or sample work costs money but, if you do not provide samples of the work specified and the expectations of the owner and architect are addressed early in the project, you will spend two to three times the cost of the sample work trying to settle the disputes that are bound to arise.

Donald E. Smith, CCS, is AWCI's director of technical services. Send your questions to smith@awci.org or call him directly at (703) 538.1611.