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# Home Building Mistakes & Fixes

**Practical Fixes for Real World  
Home Building & Repair Problems**

by  
**Buck Nemetz**



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*To my wife Dee, who for many years sat alone at night while I worked on this book up in my computer room. She thought it might never get done, but still would go down to buy me supplies to help finish it.*

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# INTRODUCTION

When I started out as a builder/remodeler, I read up on any literature that would help me do a better job, in less time and at less cost. But whenever I went out on a job, those instructions that I'd read didn't seem to help much, as the real things didn't go the way the books said. To change out a range hood, for example, you just unscrew the old one, slide in the new one, connect up the flue, and screw it on tight. Quick and easy. Right? But when I went out on the job, the screws were rusted and broke off when I tried to unscrew them. When I finally wrestled the thing out, I saw that the flue was crushed and leaking. So I had to replace that. Then when I tried to put the new hood in, I found that the opening was narrower in the back than it was in the front, so it wouldn't go in. I made some "adjustments" with my saw and a rasp, and got it in, but discovered that not only was the flue opening in the new hood in a different place than it was in the old one (I wish I'd checked that before I worked on fixing the flue), but the screwholes in the front went into air! The new hood was for standard cabinets, and the cabinets in that old kitchen were non-standard and about 2 inches shallower.

What was my other mistake on this job? I'd already named my price and hadn't included any provision for surprises. Lesson learned.

And this is how it usually went. Practically nothing ever just fit right in and hooked up just right. Maybe the people who wrote those books got all the easy jobs and left me with the battles.

But I was young (and maybe a little foolish) and I was just a bit smarter than the average Joe, and I made it my rule that I could always

fix what others couldn't. No challenge was too big for me. And it worked. Pretty soon I was known as the guy to call when there was a problem.

I lived in rural North Michigan, where we got some real weather. On top of that, we had many buildings and alterations done by either builders or do-it-yourselfers who didn't know what they were doing, or who didn't like to waste time thinking – there were some unbelievable mistakes. Combined, these made for lots of problems, and since it was a far-from-affluent area, I had to figure out fixes my customers could afford. And this I did, and I made a decent living at it too.

It took being creative. Sometimes I couldn't come up with a way on the spot, but overnight I generally figured something out. True, a modern building inspector would likely cringe at some of my fixes, and I expect current building codes wouldn't allow some of the things I did. Yet everything I did worked and held up. If it hadn't, my wife would have heard about it in the market or at the hairdresser, and my kid would have come home from school crying because the other kids were teasing her that her daddy didn't know how to build. And you thought having the inspector fail your job is hard to take?

What I'm describing in this manual is *what I did*. I'm not promoting my tips as what you should do. I'm certainly not promising the methods are in accordance with what the code you work under will allow, nor that the work will pass inspection. I'm just telling you what I did, and how I did it. I can tell you that they worked, but you'll have to judge for yourself if you should use any of these methods on *your* jobs. Maybe, if you're working under strict code enforcement and my method wouldn't pass, you can spinoff your own approved method, using mine as a base. At worst, as a builder, you may just enjoy reading my tales of the horrific building mistakes and problems I was called on to fix. And I'm pretty sure that at least one of my tales is going to come in handy for you sooner or later, either showing you how you might solve a problem, or showing you what *not* to do so you don't *create* a problem.

*Buck Neme*

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# SELECTING THE SITE

**N**one of us in the building trade can say we haven't made a mistake here and there. Some we can correct. Some we can re-do. But no mistake is as permanent or expensive as miscalculating a building site's location. You can fix a door hung the wrong way, or a window that's been framed 12 inches from where it was supposed to be . . . but how do you fix a room addition you've built that encroaches onto a neighboring lot?

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## Who's Going to Pay for This?

We've all heard war stories about contractors building on what turns out to be the neighbor's property. It's not that hard to do, and it doesn't even have to be the contractor's mistake. He could simply have been following the customer's instructions. But no matter whose fault it is, the contractor's going to take the heat. He's the professional and he's supposed to know what to check and how to check it. If he builds on the wrong land, over the setback line, or into the view corridor — even by an inch — what are the chances that the customer's going to pay him the full amount he's owed? Not good. The customer's mistake becomes the contractor's headache and expense.

When you contract to build an extension, or even just a wall, make absolutely certain you're building it where you're supposed to. And don't just go on the owner's say-so. Making assumptions about property line locations can get you in big trouble.

## Confirm Property Lines

You can hedge your bets by confirming property lines with your local building or planning department. In most areas, there are fees charged for various required permits. Each jurisdiction has specific rules, and I encourage you to make the most of your building officials' knowledge. By following their directions to the letter, you'll find the building process easier, while building a reputation with the officials for being a straight-up contractor.

**THE TIDE IS TURNING** *more in favor of rules and regulations in the building industry. It's good practice to become familiar with not only the process of building, but the permit process that precedes it.*

Let's look at a few cases where making assumptions about property lines caused problems for both the unsuspecting contractor and the naïve homeowner. You'll see it can happen quite easily.

## The Importance of Boundaries

The job was to add a room on the back of the house. The customer showed the contractor the property line. He knew exactly where it was, because that's where the nicely-mowed grass ended and an untended area began. When the customer bought the property, he and the seller had walked the lot. The seller had told him the edge of his neat green lawn was the property line, and that the neighbor never took good care of his grass.

Like the customer, the contractor hadn't doubted that was the property line — it was obvious to him. But the real boundary was actually 20 feet closer. The grass wasn't any indication of the property line at all — it just looked right. The customer had been mowing a 20-foot strip of his neighbor's yard.

The footings were dug and the cement truck was there for the pour when the neighbor showed up and said, "Hey, you're building over the lot line!"

"No," said the owner, "I was told my lot goes way over here."

"Well, you better look it up. You're trenching on my property."

That's where the cement contractor came in. Working with a transit, he confirmed the true property lines. Sure enough, the neighbor was right.



This is one of those nick-of-time saves reserved for the lucky. If the neighbor hadn't shown up, the cement would have been poured, the framing started, and possibly the whole addition would have been built extending several feet onto the adjoining lot.

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## Build on the Right Lot

Here are a couple of cases where the building wasn't just a little bit over the property line — it was on a whole different lot.

### Whose Land is This, Anyway?

In this case, the owner had bought the land for hunting many years before. He thought he knew his property well. He'd go hunting and dream of exactly where he'd build a cabin or little lodge someday, secluded on a favorite hill. The owners of the surrounding heavily-wooded land also just used it for hunting. There were no fences or other boundary marks. Each owner kept track of his land by remembering landmarks.

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*“There were no fences or other boundary marks. Each owner kept track of his land by remembering landmarks.”*

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Our owner never met any of the other landowners in the area, and went ahead with his plans. He hired a contractor, who drew up the plans based on what the “owner” told him about the property location, and built the lodge. It had been finished for several months before the neighbor returned for hunting season, saw the building, and said, “Who’s been building on *my* land?”

It wasn't just on the edge or butting up to it. It was smack dab inside the other man's property. The neighbor had bought the land primarily for investment, and quickly saw he was in a pretty good position — he had a buyer who couldn't dicker over price! He could have just said, “Thanks, neighbor.”

Fortunately for the contractor, this customer took responsibility for his mistake and paid the price. This doesn't always happen. Too often, when building deals go south, the "injured party" looks for someone to blame. Here, he could have claimed it was the contractor's responsibility to make sure of property lines, and sued him for whatever he had to pay for the land. Sadly, the courts seem to favor the poor customer over the conniving contractor. Keep that in mind and *always* check property lines yourself before you build.

## Don't Assume!

Mistakes can happen in the city, too. Here's a case where a city official, no less, made an assumption that could have had disastrous results.

This error began simply enough, from the fact that city blocks in this town didn't always have the same number of lots. The majority of blocks were 12 lots long, while a few were 16 lots long.

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*"Since most of the blocks in the city were 12 lots long, the city worker assumed that the man had bought the two end lots."*

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The city had two empty lots for sale, lots 11 and 12. Two other lots, 15 and 16, at the end of the block, were for sale privately. The buyer of the city lots was taken to see his purchase by a city representative. Since most of the blocks in the city were 12 lots long, the city worker assumed that the man had bought the two end lots. He showed him the property and said, "Here they are!" The man immediately began planning to build, enlisting the help of a local contractor. Priding himself on being methodical, and trusting the city's representative, our contractor assembled his crew and got to work.

Lots 15 and 16 had belonged to a local lumberyard whose owner had just sold the property. The new owner was *also* prepared to build. The lumberyard owner drove down this street daily, on his way to work. He saw the crew cleaning up the lot and getting ready to grade. Since he had just sold it, he assumed the new owner had hired them to clean up for the buyer. Then the real new owner drove by and saw the cleanup. But *he* knew that no one should be there.

He stopped to ask what was going on, and was told, "We're going to build two spec houses for our client on these lots he bought from

the city.” A call to the building department resulted in a visit from an inspector who sorted out the situation. It was decided that since both new owners intended to start their projects immediately, the solution was to clean up the other two lots. When both owners were satisfied that their properties were equally “prepared,” each began his project. But don’t assume your error will have such happy ending. Be prepared with the proper documents that leave no room for doubt that the property you see is what you should be building on.

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## Setbacks and View Corridors

Building on the wrong property isn’t your only worry. A far more frequent problem is building over the setback line, or blocking someone’s established view.

### Setbacks

I don’t think there’s any jurisdiction that doesn’t have setback requirements. Generally, you can’t build right on the property line. What if the next-door neighbor did too? You’d be a little too close for comfort. Setbacks are different from community to community. There are also varying requirements for the side, back and front setbacks for a property.

Measuring setbacks from the wrong spot is a common occurrence. There’s a difference between measuring from the house wall to the property line and measuring from the completed eave line. Check *before-hand* with the building department on where to measure from and what the rules are.

### The Fence is the Lot Line ... or is It?

Lot lines can be unmarked or in the wrong place. Many landowners don’t know exactly where their property lines are. They assume it’s where the fence is.

Most of the time, the fence is only “somewhere near” the property line. The exception is perhaps in new housing tracts, where the developer calculates and stakes out the lots down to a fraction of an inch to maximize the number of homes he can build on the property he bought. For less strictly defined lots, the fence is often located where the trees and the rocks don’t get in the way of a straight line.

**THE JOB WALK** Before you begin any work, do a job walk. Look for surveyor stakes in the ground at each corner. Request a legal description of the property from your customer. Explain that you need confirmation of the boundaries. If you can't find any markers, have the customer hire a surveyor to check the plot lines. Remember, you must know the exact boundaries of the property. You'll end up saving time and money for both the owner and yourself.

If you're hired to build where there's a 10-foot setback on the sides, don't think you can measure 10 feet in from the fence and start building there. If, by some oversight, the plans are approved by the building department, when an inspector comes to check the foundation work, he'll no doubt get out his tape measure. If you've built right to the setback line, leaving no leeway, you'll probably be required to hire a surveyor — at your expense, of course — to determine where you're actually allowed to build.

This just reinforces what I've been trying to stress — make it your motto *never* to start building until you're satisfied that you know exactly what you're doing. That includes having a plot plan of the property and its dimensions, *as well as* a copy of the local building guidelines, including setbacks.

Remember also that in measuring for setback, the foundation edge isn't necessarily where you measure from. A roof edge can extend as much as 2 feet beyond the foundation. So if your building will have 2-foot eaves, and the setback on the property is 10 feet, you may need to have the edge of the foundation 12 feet from the property line. Some jurisdictions allow a little leeway if it's only the eaves that extend over the setback, but you'd better make *absolutely certain* of that, and of exactly how far eaves may extend, before you pour any cement or start any building. A lot of contractors have been caught by this — and it's by no means an easy or cheap fix.

## View Corridors

View corridors are similar to setbacks. What if you put up a building or addition that blocks the neighbors' view? If the neighborhood has rules against that, you may have to tear it down. Expect to have some problems collecting your construction fee, in that case. Your customer won't be thinking about his neighbors' view — he just wants a room addition over the garage, and you weren't able to give it to him.

As property gets more expensive, a mountain or ocean view can add thousands of dollars to a house's value. Block that view and you've brought grief to your customer and a big financial blow to your company. It's your responsibility to find out the rules and advise the homeowner accordingly.

---

## Do Your Homework

A prospective homeowner may know exactly where he wants his house to be built. But it's up to you to make sure it's built in the correct location and oriented properly. There are also countless other issues to be addressed. There's more at stake than just how the entry will look or how the land slopes. Researching the job is your best insurance against the unexpected.

### Living on (or in) a Lake

Living on the water — doesn't that sound perfect? What an ideal place to call home. But don't build your customer's dream house without knowing the project area. He could find himself living *in* the water instead of *near* the water.

It's the homeowner's responsibility to provide you with the property's legal description and dimensions. If you think I repeat this too often — and I know it can be a pain in the neck to always put into practice — forget about it just once. If you do, I guarantee you'll be kicking yourself. Believe me, it's essential to verify the legal boundaries and check for easements on *every* job. Keep in mind that if anything involving your construction goes wrong for any reason, you'll be the one paying for it.

For instance, in some parts of the country — like the East and Midwest — houses are built with basements or cellars. Deciding to locate in a wetlands or waterfront area brings a whole new set of challenges and choices to the customer. Some people opt out of the basement idea. But it can be done, if you're prepared for the potential problems.

All the mistakes we're discussing are costly ones. As the contractor, you're expected to know not only how to build, but where. While it's true that the most effective way to learn is by experience, I don't recommend you learn any of *these* lessons that way. Other builders have already paid the price. Learn from *their* experience.

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