

# Drywall Detailing

An alternative to wood trim around doors, windows and skylights

by Dennis Darrah

**T**rimming out doors, windows and skylights can be a rewarding endeavor. It can also be costly, if done with the proper care and materials that this labor-intensive procedure requires. Unfortunately, as a house nears completion and costs are running over estimate, this can be one area of a job that experiences severe cutbacks. The most frequently used alternative to first-rate trim is inexpensive pine, applied as plainly as possible. Many owner-builders, and even some contractors, justify this route with the argument that one can go back through the house when time and money allow, and redo the trim in proper fashion. Of course, we all know that the chances of this happening are slim.

A more graceful alternative to the pine solution is drywall detailing around windows, sky-

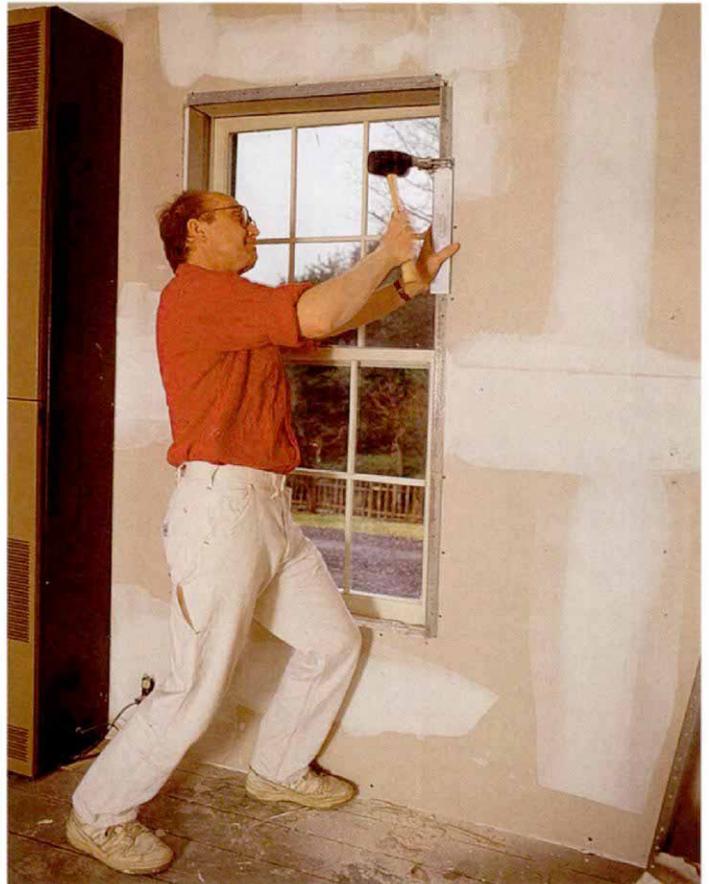
lights, archways, and even doors. Although the labor involved is comparable to that for installing wood trim, the materials are much less expensive. Don't get me wrong—I love beautiful trim work. But I also appreciate a project brought in on budget. And even where money isn't the overriding factor, drywall detailing may still be the most effective and pleasing solution to many trim problems. This is particularly true in renovation, where old work must abut new.

**Mud and metal**—The basic materials for detailing wall openings are the various beads, moldings and tapes that are available through a good drywall supplier (drawing, p. 52). If there isn't a good drywall supplier in your area, one good mail-order source is Bon Tool

Co. (4430 Gibsonia Rd., Rte. 910, Gibsonia, Pa. 15044; 412-443-7080). I have not used the blueboard and veneer-coat system of plaster, so here I'll concentrate on the standard drywall accessories.

Corner bead is the obvious choice for forming wall returns into windows, without the use of casings. It's available in galvanized steel and white vinyl. Corner bead can be attached by driving a drywall nail every 4 in. to 6 in. along each side of its length. The length of the nail will depend on the thickness of the drywall; the nail should penetrate the framing  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. One advantage of metal corner bead is that you can attach it with a crimping tool, which crimps the edges of the bead so that it grips the drywall. This saves quite a bit of time, especially on large jobs, and also helps

**Detailing a window.** Before installing corner bead, the author trims the edge of the drywall with a surform plane (left photo). The bead is attached with a metal crimping tool (right photo). A strip of drywall mesh tape spans the gap between the two pieces of corner bead.



to center the bead. If the bead is rolled to one side, it makes the other side difficult to cover with compound. Though I use a crimping tool to set the bead, I always add four to six nails for extra security. Any structural movement, particularly in a new house, is liable to show around windows and doors, and the first casualty will always be the drywall work. But there are times when nails can't be used, particularly in old houses where the interior walls have been covered with a layer of foamboard insulation beneath new drywall. The foam and drywall create built-up corners through which nails won't easily reach. In such cases, a crimping tool is all one can use in applying standard metal corner bead. Crimping tools retail for \$60 to \$70.

There is an alternative to the rigid metal or vinyl corner bead: a paper tape lined with two strips of thin galvanized steel, which forms a rigid corner when folded lengthwise (photo next page). It's sold under the names Flex-Corner and Sure-Corner, and it comes in widths of 2¼ in. to 4 in. This product is especially useful on oblique or acute angles, the kind that you're likely to find in skylight openings. It is designed, like standard paper tape, to be embedded in a layer of mud and then mudded over. It is folded at the center margin and applied with the metal facing the wall. In my estimation, it is not quite as serviceable as rigid corner bead; it doesn't always adhere well, it occasionally has to be reworked and it doesn't



Photo: Andrew Klime

**A stool cap and some paint are the only trim-work materials needed around this window.**

stand up as well to daily abuse. Despite this product's limitations, there are times when it is the only option.

Where the drywall meets the window sash, you have two alternatives: J-bead or L-bead. The basic difference is that J-bead shows as the final detail, while L-bead is mudded over (drawing next page). J-bead must also be installed when the drywall is installed. Which one I specify depends on the type of track in which the sash is mounted. J-bead works well for movable sash—window movement might cause the mud needed for L-bead to crack over time. L-bead works better for windows with complicated track where J-bead can look too busy. However, J-bead actually enhances simple retrofit track, creating a handsome thickening effect at the juncture of the return and the sash. Although you should feel free to use one or the other based on your own aesthetic, there is one caveat: if you expect high condensation levels on the window or skylight in question, stick with J-bead. Your mud work over the L-bead is liable to be damaged by the moisture collecting on and around the window.

I try to have the painters spray the J-bead before it's applied. Spray paint adheres better to metal than does a brushed-on coat. An ideal alternative, at least for white walls, is to use white vinyl J-bead, but this is usually hard to find in small quantities. I also recommend that moisture-resistant drywall be used for all

**Three coats of joint compound are applied with a 6-in. knife (left photo). The opening is sanded with 120-grit, open-weave silicon paper (right photo). No sanding is done until after the final coat has been applied.**



returns around windows and skylights that have potential condensation or moisture problems.

Windows are not usually that tricky or time-consuming to finish (bottom photos, previous page). On most returns one can usually catch both the L-bead and the corner bead in one pass of a 6-in. knife. If J-bead is used, all you have to finish are the outside corners, though on large houses this can add up to quite a bit—keep that in mind when pricing out the job.

I finish skylights much like I finish windows. First I apply the corner bead to the square corners and the flex tape to the oblique angles. I use the mesh tape on the inside corners—in my experience it holds the compound better than paper tape. I also use mesh tape to span the joints between two pieces of corner bead or a piece of corner bead and a piece of flex tape. This is necessary because the corner bead and flex tape can't overlap. Their combined thicknesses would result in a lump that no amount of tape would cover. For the first coat, I tape the inside corners, let them dry, then tape the outside corners. That way I'm not constantly fighting overlapping knife marks. I use three coats of compound. Less compound is used in the second and third coats, and because overlapping marks are less of a problem, those can be done all at once. I don't usually sand until after the final coat is done. I sand with 120-grit, open-weave silicon paper; it cuts better than standard paper, and it doesn't load up with compound as fast, either.

Be aware, however, that skylights take time to do right. If that isn't bad enough, your taping work is under the scrutiny of the most severe lighting possible—direct sunlight. To look good, it has to be done well. A bad taping job is the worst of all possible finishes.

**Levels of perfection**—I do both custom homes and commercial work. If I were to choose only the biggest buck for the least

**An alternative to rigid corner bead: paper tape laminated to two strips of thin galvanized steel. It forms a rigid corner when folded lengthwise. Although not as sturdy as rigid bead, it's the only choice when taping oblique angles.**



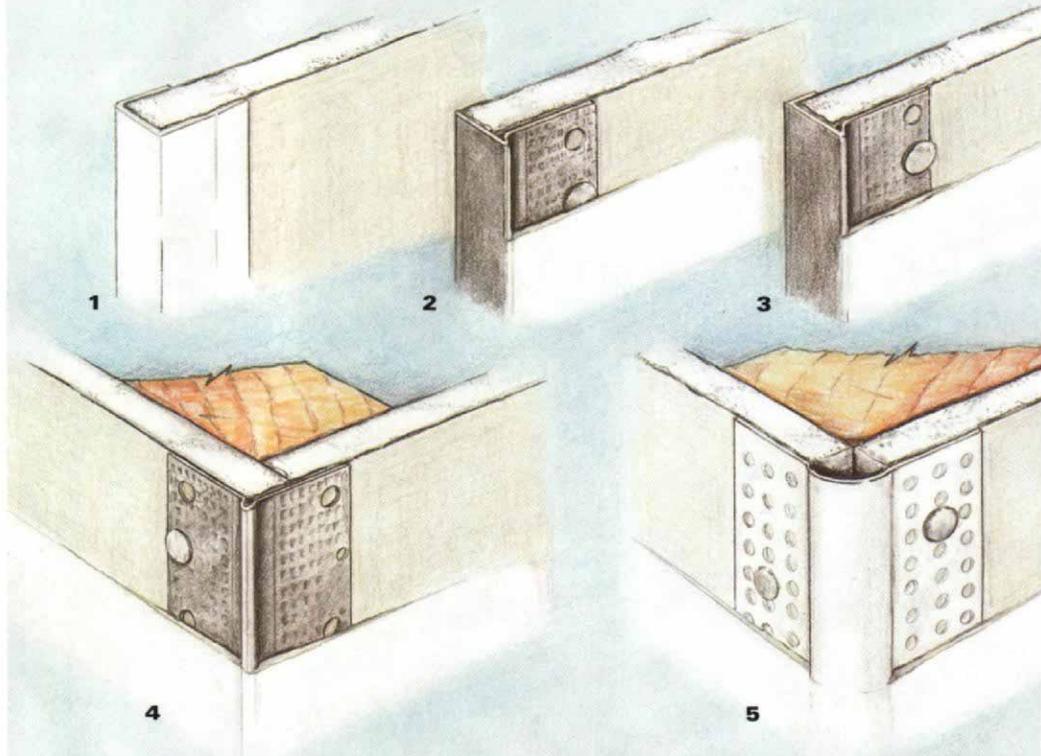
headaches, I would go strictly commercial; there are usually no ceilings to contend with, and most commercial spaces are lit with diffuse or fluorescent lighting, which is very forgiving of taping irregularities. I'm not downplaying the quality of commercial work, it just offers a different set of challenges than a custom home. On a commercial job, for instance, a good taper really has the chance to show off his speed.

In a home, on the other hand, your taping has to look good under wildly varying lighting

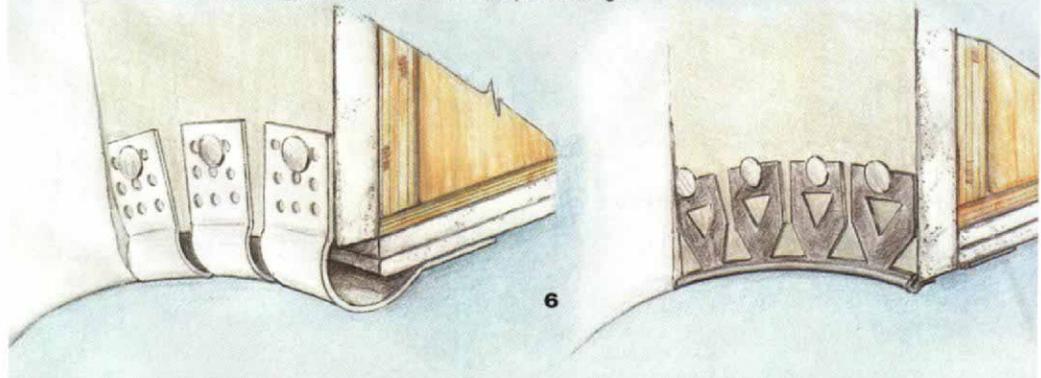
conditions. And be forewarned: no amount of paint can hide a lousy taping job. Success depends not so much on how fast you can move, but rather on how fast you can work well—it's not speed alone, but speed combined with quality that counts. When I finish-sand a custom job, I hold a spotlight in one hand and a sander in the other. Around skylights, I try to sand on cloudy days. The light is more diffuse then, and the spotlight helps me to pick out minor irregularities that would be masked by strong sunlight. Or I sand at

**A bead sampler.** There are a wide variety of drywall beads on the market. Although you'll find slight variations between manufacturers, the basic products are essentially the same. Below are a few of the more useful ones for trimming out doors and windows.

1. **J-bead.** Gives a finished edge without joint compound. Use it when the drywall edge must be isolated from a window sash or a door jamb—where there's a potential for condensation, or where door or window movement could crack the finished compound. Install it before applying the drywall. Galvanized steel J-bead can be painted before installation; white vinyl J-bead usually doesn't have to be.
2. **L-bead.** Leaves a crisp edge where the drywall meets the sash or the jamb. The exposed leg is finished with joint compound. Available in metal or vinyl.
3. **U-bead.** Gives a clean edge along with isolation of the drywall. Face nail and finish the same as L-bead. Usually installed before the drywall. Available in metal or vinyl.
4. **Standard corner bead.** Comes with a deep knurling for reinforcement of outside corners. Available in galvanized steel or white vinyl.
5. **Rounded corners.** Compound is applied to the legs; the nose is left bare and painted. Available in white vinyl or paper-faced galvanized metal.



6. **Archway bead.** For trimming arched or rounded window and door openings. The white vinyl variety has a rounded edge; metal bead has a squared edge.



night, and check it out by the light of the next day. I find it hard to sand in the glare of direct sunlight and have it come out right.

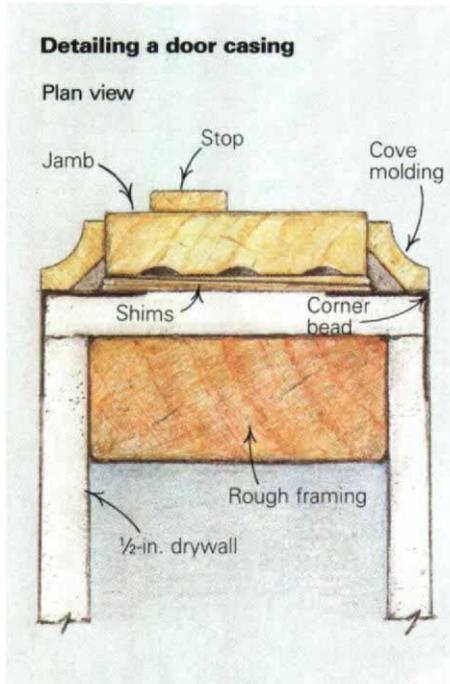
Drywall can be dry-sanded, wet-sanded or sponged. There are arguments in defense of each method. I've never wet-sanded. I used to sponge, but I never got good results from it. The sponge always left visible ridges and smears that didn't seem to happen with dry-sanding. I now dry-sand and swear by it. The tools involved are hand sanders, pole-mounted or hand-held. The sanders are rubber-backed and take precut sandpaper (100, 120, or 150 grit) or Fabricut sandpaper, which is an open-weave silicon carbide sanding cloth that does not readily clog with dust. This comes in 100 and 120 grit. Power tools have no place in sanding seams. For one thing, you risk ripping the drywall paper with a power sander. Besides, if the seams are that heavily overloaded with mud, go back and do a skim coat or get out of the taping business.

I have only had one opportunity to trim out interior doors with drywall. The rough opening is wrapped with drywall, the corner bead applied, then the door jamb and the mud. A piece of cove molding helps ensure that no gaps will develop over time between the jamb and the drywall. Although the job really could be done without the cove molding, I feel the door opening looks a lot better when it's there.

**Flat-taping**—Being a timber framer in addition to a drywall taper, I've done a lot of flat-taping next to exposed timbers (photo below left); flat-taping is only necessary where stress-skin panels aren't used. I feel that it's impor-

tant to mask out the timber before applying the drywall. This not only speeds up the taping and painting, but protects the timbers throughout the whole process. Mud is applied to the wall abutting the timber, then paper tape embedded flat in the mud, its edge carefully aligned with the timber. The paper tape will cover any gaps between the timber and the drywall. If the gaps are excessive, they can be pre-filled with a patching plaster or even a spray foam.

A trick for speeding up the finish of a tim-



ber-frame ceiling is to install the drywall from above. Simply prepaint the ceiling drywall and lay it on top of the timber joists, gluing and screwing it as you go. Lay the subfloor and finish floor on top of the drywall, then screw the drywall up into the subfloor. With typical 2-ft. centered timber joists, there is no ceiling taping to do whatsoever. To facilitate accurate screwing into the joists, pre-snap chalklines on the back of each piece of drywall. For beams with rough surfaces, you can protect the drywall by installing a strip of closed-cell sill sealer between the joists and the drywall.

I did one renovation job on an old timber frame with exposed rough beams on 4-ft. centers. Using the above system, I saved myself some 280 ft. of flat taping next to the edges of the beams. A word of caution, however—be careful not to step through the drywall before the subfloor is in place.

**The bottom line**—You're limited only by your imagination in the use of drywall to enhance interior finishes. For example, I once built drywall-formed light fixtures in a cathedral ceiling (photo below right), along with a false column to provide a wire-chase and to hide a structural steel rod.

Once you get good at doing drywall details you'll be in greater demand. You may find contractors and architects consulting you before completing the design of a house. If you work it right, you can get paid for your design suggestions, as well as for their execution. □

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**A timber-frame alternative.** Install the floor joists, then lay the drywall from above and avoid taping against the beams.



Photo: Dennis Darrah

**Drywall-formed light fixtures** are a graceful alternative to a truncated cathedral ceiling. Besides permitting overhead lights, they add interesting detail to the apex. Note also the drywall-formed wire chase beside the chimney.



Photo: Andrew Kline