

TEACHING ABOUT FLATS

The scenery pieces generally used for walls in architectural sets are called "flats" or "panels" (depending on where you live).

There are basically two types of flats. The difference is essentially in the way they are framed.

Hard flats ("Hollywood flats", "TV panels") are built with their framing members set on edge, connected directly to each other with nails, staples, or screws. They are referred to as hard flats as they are usually covered in a hard material such as plywood.

Soft flats ("flat flats", "theatrical style flats") are built with the framing pieces lying, .um, "flat", usually attached to each other with pieces of plywood (called "corner blocks" (used at the corners) and "keystones" (used at the "toggles" or middle framing members) which bridge the seam between to adjacent pieces. These corner blocks and keystones are usually glued and stapled or nailed in place.

Soft flats are usually covered with fabric.

All flats are NOT 4' x 8'. I store flats of heights of even numbered feet and widths in 6" increments.

Having a student build a flat - especially one of a smaller size - teaches more than just "how to build it". There's measuring and adjusting measurements to scale, use of the necessary hand and power tools, selecting and using the right hardware, learning about wood types/ grain direction/ what kind to use when, understanding the weave of fabric and how it shrinks, use of brushes to paint/flame-retard, and so on ...

I've done this with great success and let the kids keep the flat as a memento/portfolio piece. Think of it as a "sampler" where they learn how to paint a base coat, splatter, dry brush, rag roll, etc. It gives them something tangible to show their parents and all those skills transfer to other aspects of theatre arts.

The fact many of us grew up with a hammer and screwdriver in hand doesn't mean most students have. I find that MANY of them are clueless of where to start. A local hardware store (with very patient, pre-trained staff) helps them select the materials as part of a scavenger hunt.

I have seen traditional flats used in professional level shows - typically in rep theatres. They don't tour well and so logically aren't used there.

Sometimes the purpose is to put on a show, sometimes it is to educate.