

**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**  
**April 30, 2026**  
**Idioms about Architecture, Building and Community**

Today, we will do something different from what we usually do. We will review and discuss some *idioms* about a topic we covered a couple of times this year – architecture, buildings and communities. So far we have discussed Angkor Wat and the Ancestral Puebloans. We'll discuss other famous examples of architecture throughout the year.

As you review the idioms, here are some things you can discuss about each of them:

- a) Does your native language have a similar idiom?
- b) Have you ever heard of this idiom before?
- c) What is the literal meaning of the words in the idiom?
- d) What is the figurative meaning of the words in the idiom?
- e) Try to use the idiom in a sentence of your own.

***Idioms About Architecture, Buildings And Communities***

**1. break ground**

**Meanings:** To start a new project or construction of a building; to make a significant breakthrough that changes current understanding of a topic; to pioneer a new method or field of study

**Examples:**

- *Her research is breaking ground in cancer treatment.*
- *The city is finally breaking ground on the new subway system tomorrow.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: Gilda got funding for her new startup.

B: I heard her research is **breaking ground** in environmentally friendly fashion.

A: Yes, a large company read about her idea to make leather from mushrooms.

B: She's putting a team together to come out with her first products.



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**2. brick by brick**

**Meaning:** building or doing something step by step; working steadily

**Example:** *The company expanded their business brick by brick over two decades. Now they are the best in the industry.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: My grandfather started his restaurant with a small food stand.

B: I remember it was very popular. People loved his food. They would line up around the block until he sold out.

A: Yes, he made enough money to open a small restaurant and expanded it over the years.

B: He built it up **brick by brick**, didn't he? I heard you are going to open another restaurant using the same recipes in a new location.

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**3. to build bridges**

**Meaning:** to improve relationships, foster understanding, or create connections between people or groups who are different, hostile with each other, or who don't interact with other groups

**Example:** *Instead of arguing, we should build bridges and find common ground.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: There are a lot of people who are not happy with the new mayor. They think he will cut back on services.

B: He wants to **build bridges** with people who have been criticizing him.

A: He knows people are worried about city services, but he is more worried about the budget.

B: He's going to start **building bridges** with people by hosting neighborhood coffees.

**4. to build castles in the air**

**Meaning:** to create unrealistic plans, daydream, or have hopes that are highly unlikely to happen

**Example:** *Instead of finding a job, she is busy building castles in the air about winning the lottery.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: I'm worried about Jen. The only thing she does all day is play her guitar and sing.

B: I know. She is **building castles in the air** about becoming a big music star.

A: She is talented, but the music business is tough.

B: I told her, she has to stop daydreaming and find a job to pay for food and the rent.

**5. to build from the ground up**

**Meaning:** to create or establish something entirely from the beginning; to make something from the first step through to completion

**Example:** *After the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, many people had to **rebuild their homes from the ground up**.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: I'm nervous about starting this new company. It's such a huge undertaking.

B: I know, but we get to **build it from the ground up** exactly how we want.

A: That's what I keep telling myself, but it's a big risk.

B: Well, let's build it **brick by brick** and lay down a solid foundation.

**6. to build on sand**

**Meaning:** To establish plans, relationships, or projects on a weak foundation, leading to failure or big challenges.

**Example:** *A business that does not carefully research their products and competitors is building on sand – it's bound to fail.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: Before you build your house near the lake, check the ground to confirm it is safe to build.

B: I know. I hired an engineer to check the soil and land stability.

A: Good. You don't want to literally **build on sand**.

B: That's for sure. My uncle built a home on the beach and the foundation slipped. He lost the house.



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**7. to cement a relationship**

**Meaning:** to make a bond, friendship, or partnership strong, more solid, or long-lasting

**Example:** *They went on a trip together to **cement their friendship***

**Example Dialog:**

A: Maria really likes her new neighbors, Sandy and Fred. They help her do yard work.

B: Yes, they really **cemented their relationship** last week when the neighbors found Maria's lost cat.

A: I heard that the cat escaped from the house, but Maria didn't know it.

B: Yes, Sandy and Fred found it under their porch, and they brought it back to Maria. She was so grateful.

**8. cornerstone of something**

**Meaning:** the essential, foundational, or most important part of a theory, system, building or organization

**Example:** *Trust is the **cornerstone** of any successful relationship.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: The company made a good profit this year.

B: That's because the employees worked harder and smarter than ever before.

A: So true. The management trusted its workers' decisions.

B: Hard work and careful planning are the **cornerstones** of building a strong organization.

**9. to draw up plans**

**Meaning:** to prepare or create detailed plans, documents, or strategies

**Example:** *The city council is in the process of drawing up plans for a new community park.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: The company is more successful than we all thought it would be.

B: We've grown so much, we need to enlarge our office building.

A: I've already hired an architect and interior designer to **draw up plans**.

B: Fantastic. The sooner, the better.



**10. to fall through the cracks**

**Meaning:** to be overlooked, forgotten, or neglected by a system or process

**Example:** *The project did not have enough people to work on it, so many details fell through the cracks. Now it is delayed for 6 months.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: We've been so busy the past few months.

B: Yes, some of the things we planned to do **have fallen through** the cracks.

A: Let's make a list of them and try to get them done, if it's not too late.

B: Sounds good. I'll get started on it right now.

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**11. to frame the issue or problem**

**Meaning:** to define a problem or topic in a specific way to influence how it is understood by others

**Example:** *The politician tried to frame the issue around lack of funding rather than poor management.*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: We have to be very careful how we **frame the issues** around new product development.  
B: We can present different points of view so that we understand the problems we might run into.  
A: I can **frame the potential problems** from the point of view of the customer.  
B: Okay. I'll **frame the issues** from the point of view of the engineers.

**12. back to the drawing board**

**Meaning:** to start over from scratch after a plan or project fails

**Example:** *Our proposal was turned down, so it's back to the drawing board to come up with a new plan.*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: How did the clinical trials of the new medicine go?  
B: The medicine did not do as well as the researchers expected.  
A: Yes, it's back to the **drawing board** for them, but they are getting closer.  
B: The good news is that management still supports them.

**13. to get in on the ground floor**

**Meaning:** To join a project or business early to benefit from its success

**Example:** *She **got in on the ground floor** of the tech startup. Now she's a senior executive there.*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: Anna started a new clothing company that's doing really well. Mark works there.  
B: Yes, Mark and Anna were good friends at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.  
A: I see. Is that how Mark **got in on the ground floor** as one of the main designers?  
B: That helped him, but he is a really talented and good designer.

**14. to hammer it out**

**Meaning:** to reach an agreement, solution, or plan after extensive, often difficult discussion, negotiation, or debate

**Example:** *We had several meetings, but we finally **hammered out** a new deal with our customer.*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: Our soccer team really wanted to hire the star player from France.  
B: Yes, everybody wants him. He's so good.  
A: Well, I heard that the team **hammered out** a very attractive deal that will be hard to refuse.  
B: Ok, let's see what he decides to do.

**15. to lay the foundation**

**Meaning:** to put down the groundwork, base, or essential preparation for a future project or structure

**Example:** *This company's training program will **lay the foundation** for developing new managers.*



A new foundation. [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

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**Dialog:**

- A: The company's founder is going to retire next year.  
B: Are you worried that the company will not do well when he leaves?  
A: Not really. He has been planning for a while and **laid the foundation** for a smooth transition.  
B: That's good. I heard he handpicked and trained his successor for several years.

**16. to nail it down**

**Meaning:** to finalize a plan, secure an agreement, or identify something with precision and certainty

**Example:** *The boss asked all his department managers to nail down their final budgets by Friday.*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: Hank and Lucy do not want a big wedding, but Hank's parents do. He's an only child.  
B: Lucy suggested they have a small wedding for family and close friends instead so they can save the money for a house.  
A: When his parents heard her reasoning, they could see it made sense.  
B: She nailed down all the details for why this would be better in the long run and they agreed.



**17. to raise the roof**

**Meaning:** To make a lot of noise or create great excitement, specifically through cheering, singing, or partying enthusiastically; to get very upset about some thing or somebody's behavior

**Example:** *As our team scored the winning goal at the buzzer, the audience jumped up and raised the roof with their cheers and shouts of delight.*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: Did you watch the game last night?  
B: I sure did. I was at the stadium!  
A: Did you see them score the winning touchdown?  
B: Yes, it was so exciting. Everyone went wild and **raised the roof**, we were so happy.

**18. the roof caved in**

**Meaning:** a structure has collapsed inward, or metaphorically, that a situation has unexpectedly and disastrously fallen apart

**Example:** *The earthquake shook so violently, the roof caved in!*

**Example Dialog:**

- A: You won't believe it, but I just got a call from my neighbor.  
B: What happened? Is everything okay?  
A: Not really—the roof caved in over the kitchen during the storm.  
B: Oh no! All their plans for their future caved in too.

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**19. to stick to the blueprint or plans**

**Meaning:** to follow an established plan, design, or set of instructions closely, without making changes, even if challenges arise

**Example:** *If we stick to the blueprint, we will finish the project on time.*

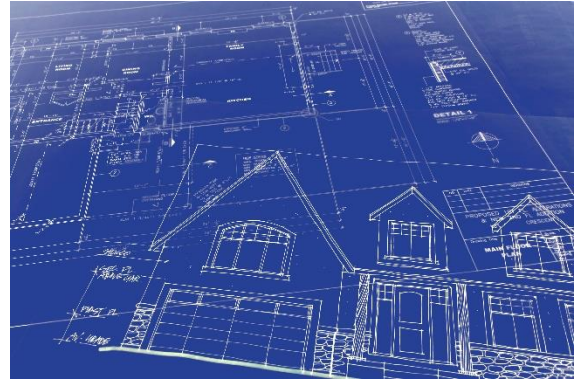
**Example Dialog:**

A: I think we can take a short cut through the woods.

B: It's getting dark. We better stick to the plans and follow the map we drew out earlier.

A: It's just a small change. I don't think it'll be a problem.

B: No way! I'm not risking getting lost in an unknown place. Let's follow the plan and we'll get there safely.



**20. to tear down the walls**

**Meaning:** to get rid of barriers and obstacles that separate people or prevent communication and progress

**Example:** *We need to tear down the walls between departments to improve production in the business.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: The two groups are finally **tearing down walls** to make progress for the new state park.

B: I heard. The original plan did not account for the extra traffic and the neighborhood group complained.

A: Yes, the state scaled back the plan.

B: That's good. The new park will be enjoyed for many years to come.

**21. window of opportunity**

**Meaning:** a short, limited, or fleeting period of time during which a specific, desirable action can be taken to achieve success before it is too late

**Example:** *The company has a narrow window of opportunity to develop their product before the competition.*

**Example Dialog:**

A: The unexpected visit from the world famous architect was lucky for Sally.

B: Yes, it was a wonderful **window of opportunity** for her to show the architect her design for the new office building.

A: Yes, he made several suggestions.

B: Sally thinks the design is much better now.

**References**

[https://postdigitalarchitecture.com/blogs/articles/architectural-idioms?srsId=AfmBOoqKyuz0TdOR4\\_M5UrgRI3GrdgQ07DR4voiED2MI\\_-4zMTyRuhD2](https://postdigitalarchitecture.com/blogs/articles/architectural-idioms?srsId=AfmBOoqKyuz0TdOR4_M5UrgRI3GrdgQ07DR4voiED2MI_-4zMTyRuhD2)