

The **Fine Homebuilding** Interview

# Mike Litchfield

A founding editor and pioneering how-to journalist takes us back to where it all began

BY AARON FAGAN

**W**ith *Fine Homebuilding's* 40th anniversary upon us, we thought an origin story (and more) would be a good place to begin this new interview series—and who better to speak with than one of *Fine Homebuilding's* founding editors, Mike Litchfield. Mike was among the pioneering technical journalists to visit job sites and gather first-hand information from builders, and his classic book, *Renovation*, was published in its fifth edition by The Taunton Press in May 2019.

The Taunton Press founder Paul Roman's first public announcement of the publisher's forthcoming magazine about building houses appeared in *Fine Woodworking* magazine in May 1980. It

read: "Just as a void existed for the serious woodworker when we started *Fine Woodworking* magazine five years ago, so does a void exist for the serious home builder and renovator today. There is no magazine that covers the whole broad and vital field of home building with quality, style and depth. So, we at The Taunton Press are starting a magazine this fall that will do just that, and we're calling it *Fine Homebuilding*, because that's what it will be about."

The hope was that readers would welcome a magazine that seriously covered the craft of building houses, and here we are: 40 years on, the magazine has never lost its focus on presenting seasoned, practicable building information. Mike Litchfield was there at the beginning, and his work continues today.

**AF: In 1980, I imagine there were no strong precedents for technical building journalism. How did you start out, and how were you discovered?**

ML: You're right, there really wasn't much out there. I mean, there wasn't much in terms of truly competitive magazines. But before I get into that, let me back up a little bit. In the late 1960s, I migrated up to the poorest and coldest part of Vermont, the so-called Northeast Kingdom (which is an ironic nickname to be sure), where I found an 1826 schoolhouse I bought from a coffin maker for 6000 bucks—most of which I had to borrow, because I didn't make much as the teaching principal of a three-room school. I should note that I also was innocent of any skills or experience in the building area. This old place turned out to have pretty much everything wrong with it that a house could have wrong.

**AF: Sounds like the perfect education for the author of a book titled *Renovation*.**

ML: You're probably familiar with the Samuel Johnson quotation, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Well, I soon realized that my old house was a wreck that could collapse around me, and even though it wasn't much money, it was all I had. I was terrified. I found there were few books and fewer magazines that gave me enough information to do any part of this renovation.

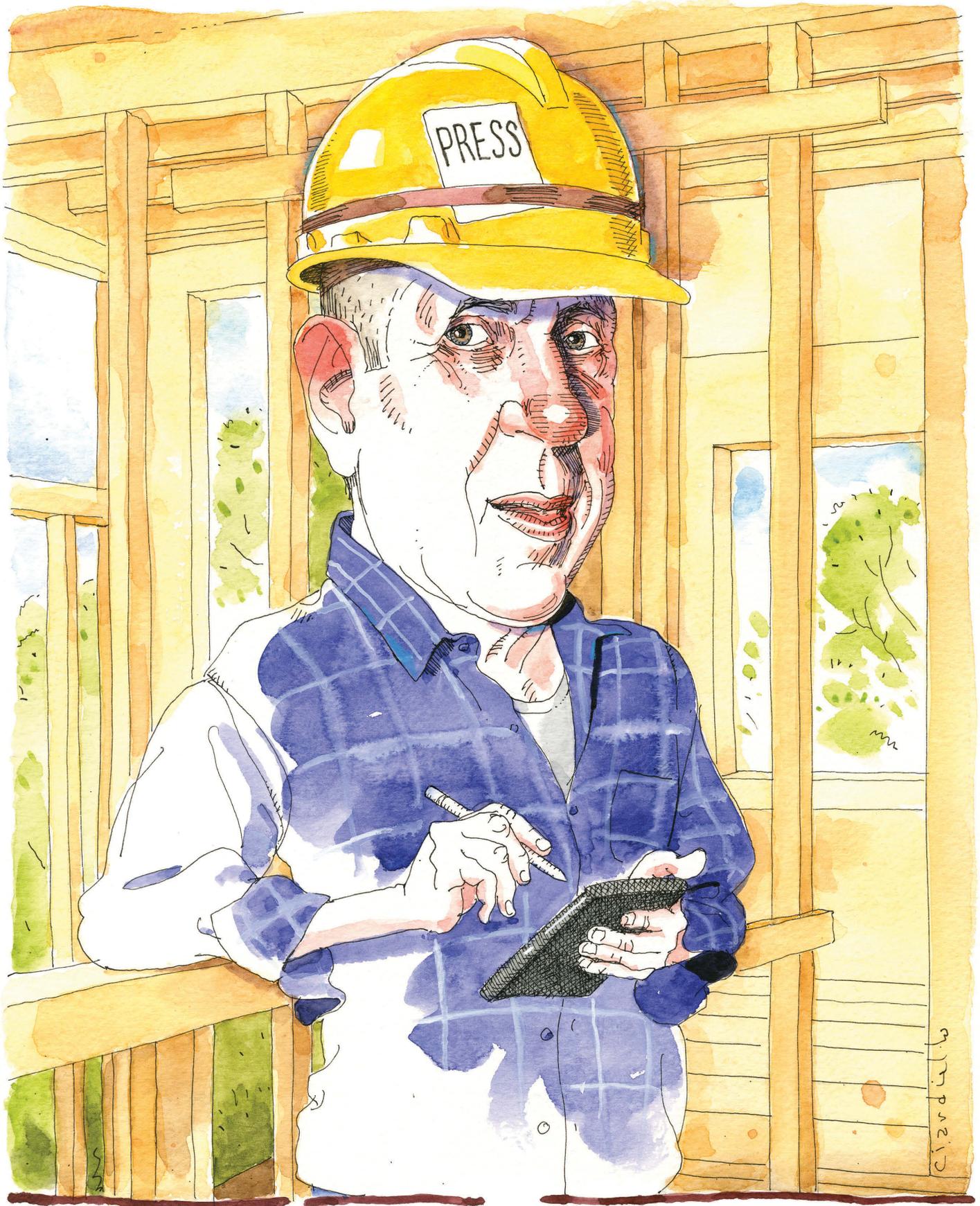
I started haunting job sites, hoping to talk to workers on break or after work. It's really interesting how people who love what they do, or are pretty good at what they do, are incredibly generous with sharing their information. I like talking to people anyhow, and I really became fascinated by the process of discovering how every tool

or technique is actually a response or solution to some kind of problem.

My investigations eventually led to the first edition of *Renovation*, but when I finally sent off the giant manuscript to John Wiley & Sons, they said, "This is going to take us a while. You better get a real job somewhere."

Soon after, I noticed an ad for an associate editor for *Fine Woodworking* and thought, "That's sort of in the vein of what I do." I was a wood butcher at best—I didn't know anything about *fine* woodworking—but I needed a job. I sent a letter and they replied, "OK. Come on down, let's talk."

So, I get there, and I'm a little nervous. We talked for about three hours. All the while I'm pretending like I'm some kind of expert at woodworking, at the end of which Paul sort of smiles and says, "I'm not quite sure how much real hands-on experi-



ence you have with woodworking, but in any event, the ad was just kind of a stalking horse. We didn't want to show our hand, but we're thinking about starting a magazine on home building. Would you like to work on it?"

**AF: Wow!**

ML: I was reeling. I said, "Heck yes! I'd love to, but I don't have any experience making a magazine." He said, "That's OK, you can learn that." So that's how it began. I was their first hire.

**AF: What was the impetus to start the magazine, in your words?**

ML: Baby boomers were coming of age and in need of housing. I think Taunton saw a niche. I don't know how to say this politely, but most of what was out there were frivolous publications that had some gorgeous pictures and gushy prose and really very little substance. As an amateur renovator, I had been scrambling like crazy to find information. There were engineering journals and stuff like that, but they were incomprehensible to a nonprofessional.

**AF: I used to work for *Scientific American*, and our charge was to translate the world of the specialist to the general reader.**

ML: That magazine was actually in the back of Paul's mind. Talking things over, we saw no reason why a publication about housing shouldn't be technically accurate, readable, and even beautiful. It had to be authoritative—real expertise without being stodgy, but plainspoken and conversational. That was really right at the top of the list. Paul said, "I've always been really impressed by *Scientific American*, because the articles appear initiated by people who are out there in the field."

**AF: And they are fluent in the language of the field.**

ML: It gives it an authenticity that's unmistakable. Paul said explicitly, "I want the pros to suggest these topics as much as possible, so when you're out there, prod them, get them in conversation. Find what they're excited about. And I don't want you writing the articles—at least not the first draft. I want them to initiate it in some form,

because you'll get something you wouldn't have expected."

Cultivating that tone was really the hard part. Finding people wasn't difficult. Good people know other good people. Building the network took time, but the hardest part was convincing a contractor or electrician who has probably never written anything—he's busy as hell, you can only get him at five a.m.—to write an article for a nonexistent magazine. That was hard.

**AF: What was it like watching the abstract idea of a community become a reality?**

ML: One of the things Paul Roman did early on was insist I develop a grid to structure the magazine. There would be features about design, new construction, renovation, and mechanicals like plumbing or wiring. There would be a tool review, and there would be something on materials. That structure, however adjustable or tenuous that it was, kept all the information coming at us from becoming maddening.

Back in the late '60s, there was the *Whole Earth Catalog*, this wonderful hodgepodge of just everything. Steve Jobs actually called it "the Internet before the Internet." All these little atoms out there could connect, which is what you're describing here in terms of a community coming out of the mist that really didn't exist. Paul just

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said, "Here's a credit card, go see what's out there." Boy, the freedom in that! And I was respectful of it. It was wonderful to meet these people in the field. I found most contractors to be really surprisingly idealistic. And almost to a one, they told me about the first house they built and how they all lost money on it, because they wanted to do it so well. These are people in a hardball

business, mind you, who wouldn't usually be suspected of such a heart-on-their-sleeve sentiment, but they really want to do it well.

**AF: How has building changed for better or worse in the last 40 years?**

ML: Building science would certainly be at the top of the list for the better. Back then, the vast majority of builders gave little thought to how buildings work as a system in terms of moisture migration, air infiltration, indoor-air quality, and the like. As for worse, in the good old days, a sketch on a piece of 8½ x 11 typing paper could get your permit approved. Now it takes nine or ten 24-in. by 36-in. sheets, and many departments outsource their plan checks to for-profit companies that complicate the process.

**AF: When you look back at building journalism, what are some high-water marks?**

ML: I think *Fine Homebuilding* has done a pretty good job. It's almost as if we imparted some kind of DNA to go out there and really listen. It's a kind of scientific way of writing—you really want to observe what's there, not what your preconceptions and assumptions are, but what's actually there. I think the magazine has been laudable in the sense that it has strived to really serve its readership. I think it has kept its sincerity about being of benefit and not just some kind of manufacturer's tout. That's a hard act to perform for 40 years.

**AF: Earlier you alluded to the magazine as a response to the needs of a generation. How will housing evolve to reflect the economic and environmental realities of the future?**

ML: Well, for one thing, zoning laws need a serious update. Nuclear-family zoning rules implemented after World War II don't fit today's pluralistic households. Our demographics have changed radically. We're not the same country we were 50 years ago—for better or worse—but that's the reality. Because the costs and the complexity of housing have increased, we're going to have to build houses with smaller footprints. And that housing is going to have to be more flexible, in terms of the uses you can make of it for the reasons you cite.

**AF: That makes me think of ADUs, which are now legal in many places.**

ML: Right. In California, newly enacted statutes allow you to build an ADU “by matter of right.” In other words, you don’t have to convince some local authority that you need one. Often, building an ADU is about taking care of your own, whether you’re politically right, left, up, down, or whatever. It’s human need.

By the way, while researching my book on ADUs, I learned that Americans have a shared-housing gene like the rest of humanity. Today’s zoning often reflects a nuclear-family bias, but a century ago most U.S. homes had several generations under one roof, in the same percentages that Southern European, Asian, and Hispanic families do today.

**AF: What is the biggest elephant in the room of the home-building industry that needs to be addressed?**

ML: The American dream of owning a home may soon be only a dream. Vast numbers of people are finding it harder and harder to come up with a down payment or to qualify for mortgages, despite historically low interest rates. Factors include massive inequality of wealth in the United States; soaring building costs and increasingly marginal building sites; excessive regulation and onerous permit compliance; wrong-headed government fiscal policies, such as those following the 2008 meltdown, which helped keep housing prices artificially high so the banks wouldn’t tank; and real-estate investment trusts (REITs) that bought up millions of foreclosed homes, thus competing against individual home-buyers who might have found a home they could afford. Long term, I think the housing market in the United States will look more and more like that of Europe, in which turnover is rare and the majority of citizens rent.

**AF: When you look back at your time at the magazine, does some recurring truth strike you?**

ML: Yes. Every time I went to a job site—every time—I would see something that amazed me. There’s a kind of immediacy of being on a job site. There’s no substitute for it. That’s the whole model—getting back to the magazine and why it was started—Paul

Roman was absolutely right: You gotta get out there in the field and see what’s there. It’s not the same writing from a desk.

There’s a passage in *Moby Dick* where Melville describes the ship’s carpenter as if the man himself was a wonderfully designed tool that could do an incredible number of things so exactly and economically, that he seemed to be almost another species. It’s the same with builders: Some of the most tongue-tied people imaginable are brilliant in all sorts of other ways.

**AF: Getting the language right is one thing, but how did you develop the visuals?**

ML: I found the best illustrators—and among them would certainly be Bob La Pointe—always came back with a zillion questions. Bob wouldn’t illustrate something if he didn’t understand how it was built. The very best illustrators have the

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same passion as the really good editors—they have to know; they will not kid you. They are scrupulously honest and tenacious in terms of really understanding how these things go together.

The same is true of photos: You have to ask questions. We are blessed by the digital-photography revolution. I’ve probably taken up to 60,000 photos by now—you keep snapping until you get stuff that surprises even you. But plastering, for example, is all technique and body language—for which you need videos. You can sort of describe it, but it won’t really make sense until you see somebody doing it. There’s a whole evolution of our means of getting information that has changed in 40 years.

**AF: Ever feel overwhelmed by this flood of information?**

ML: Absolutely. The great jobs are when we are in over our heads. I was certainly in over my head starting the magazine. That

goes back to the expression, “Many hands make light work.” I mean that we really do need each other to figure stuff out. I’m not dexterous—if I had to make a living as a builder, I’d starve. But I am really curious about stuff, and sincere about wanting to know the answers. That’s the little bit that I can contribute to our end of things with the building community. And it really takes all of us. It’s like there is kind of a collective genius out there, but it’s sort of squashed out by a lot of the models that say you have to be an expert. If you’ve got the courage to try, you can really surprise yourself.

**AF: What you’re saying goes to the heart of what makes *Fine Homebuilding* special. You built a living refuge for that “many hands make light work” ethos.**

ML: I helped. There’s an expression I used to hear a lot: “building it true.” I think if you start out right, and your intention is clean—I don’t want to get into the province of the soul, but there’s something about it—all else follows. I got to see parts of the country I’d never been to and meet extraordinarily kind and interesting people—all “friends of friends”—and that has grown in a widening circle to the community it is today.

Launching *Fine Homebuilding* was an amazing experience. In the first three or four months, I took six major trips around the country, to California (twice), the Pacific Northwest, the upper Midwest, the Southeast, Texas, and New Orleans. My visits were fleeting, but the personal connections felt like fast friendships. I’m not sure why, but people really opened up to me. I crashed on their sofas, ate with their families, rode in pickups with 4-ft. levels in the gun rack, crawled through raccoon-inhabited crawlspaces, played with their dogs, and stayed up late listening to their stories, struggles, and dreams. Yeah, it was a job, but seeing so much of the country and its people made me feel incredibly patriotic. As Woody Guthrie sang, “And all around me, a voice was sounding, ‘This land was made for you and me.’” □

Aaron Fagan, a former associate editor for *Fine Homebuilding*, is a freelance writer and the author of three books of poetry, including *A Better Place Is Hard to Find* (The Song Cave, 2020).