

Matt Risinger

This Austin builder is using his growing network to teach builders and clients to demand better

BY AARON FAGAN

We caught up with regular *Fine Homebuilding* contributor Matt Risinger as he was en route from his home in Austin, Texas, to a job site in Missouri—where he would be meeting with builder Jake Bruton and architect Steve Baczek. They are all part of The Build Show Network, Risinger’s growing group of mentors utilizing social-media platforms to advance the culture of the home-building

industry by holding it to a higher standard through the power of example.

Matt is the owner of Risinger Build, host of The Build Show, and founder of Build Productions. The object of these ventures has been to shape what we talk about when we talk about building by helping people recognize quality craftsmanship and understand the role building science plays in creating lasting, healthy homes.

AF: What did the building-science learning curve look like when you began?

MR: It was huge for me. Honestly, *Fine Homebuilding* was a big part of that story. I started subscribing to the magazine in the late 1990s and thought, “I can’t imagine building one of these houses. They are so detailed and cool.” I mean, I was building matchstick-box houses. Then when the mold crisis hit, I started to get connected to EEBA [the Energy & Environmental Building Alliance], the Houses That Work program, and eventually people like Mark LaLiberte and Joe Lstiburek.

AF: The view from here is that you’ve grown your media presence in a widening circle of education and leadership. It’s not just about promoting a local business any longer; you appear poised to make real progress toward smashing old myths that performance comes at the expense of aesthetics.

MR: I love that I get a lot of views on my videos, because it allows me to have more of a mouthpiece in the marketplace for

people to demand better. I’ve realized over the years that you can’t just tell builders to build better. They have to have a market that gives them the incentive to change. That’s what it’s been about with my videos as they’ve gotten more traction. Years ago, when I had 50,000 subscribers or so, the split was probably 80% professionals and 20% nonprofessionals. Today, as I am approaching a million, it’s just about the flip of that: 30% to 40% builders, remodelers, and architects, and at least 50% people who want to know what builders think is the best way to build. I’ve got people in the comments writing, “Hey, I told my builder about this, and he didn’t know anything about it, but he is super excited to do this for my house.”

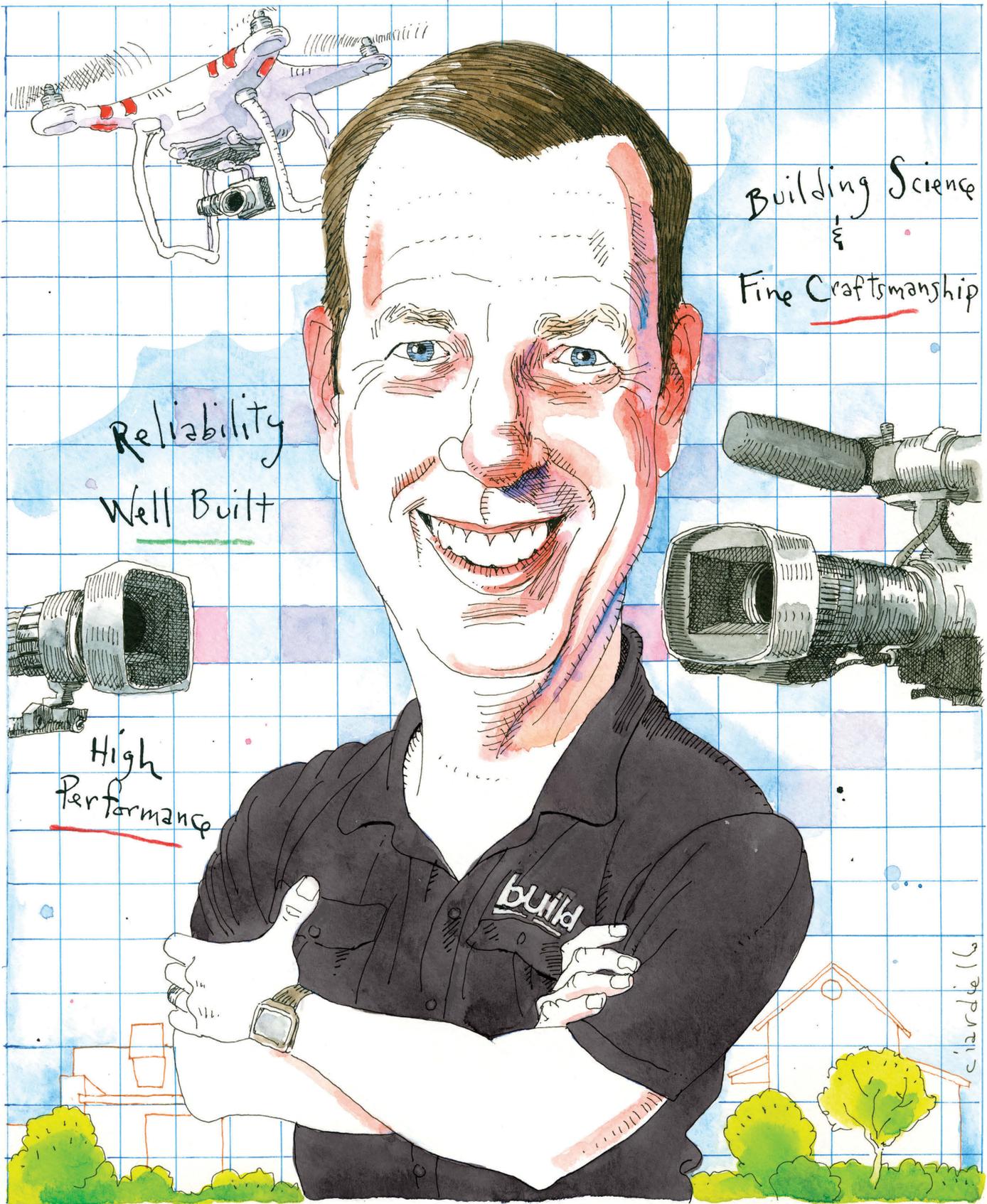
AF: That’s extraordinary, what you just said. That’s culture change happening in real time.

MR: That’s what I’m hoping for. You know, I traveled to Europe last year—it’s not that I’m enamored with Europe or that I think Europeans are so awesome—but

one thing I think they have gotten right is they have a very long-term view on houses. And we, historically as Americans, have had a very short-term view about houses. If I can help dispel that notion even in 1% of the American population, I will have made a huge difference.

AF: A lot of high-performance products come from Europe. How far are we from having more homegrown triple-glazed windows?

MR: That’s the bummer. There are American companies that have the technology and the ability, but they don’t feel like the product will sell. So, they don’t market them a whole lot or sell many. It’s this little fringe business for them. Whereas other manufacturers, that’s all they make. If you need to buy a window in Ukraine, you can’t find a double-glazed. Part of that is climate—I get that companies here have got to sell across the country. But something that I talk about a lot is glazing. I feel like that’s such a low-hanging fruit. Most of our glass is an R-3. All we’d have to do is go



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to an R-6 and our houses would be hugely more efficient.

AF: And that would hold true for heating and cooling climates?

MR: In every climate. Just because we are in Texas or Florida doesn't mean we don't have a 30° delta between inside and outside the majority of the year.

AF: When you think of where you began and where you are today, what stands out?

MR: One thing that I've always tried to do is baby-step my way toward a better house by doing things a little better on every project. I didn't go from building 2x4 houses to all of a sudden building some "gee-whiz" house.

AF: How do you bridge building best practices with reality? How do you communicate tricky details with tricky personalities?

MR: I am always talking about craftsmanship. The best materials can perform horrendously if they are installed incorrectly, so we have to really pay attention to our craftsmanship. Most of the time, I'll take a good craftsman with real basic materials any day over a real fancy material with a lesser craftsman installing it. That's been another key to success over the years: finding talented subcontractors who can do good work on my projects.

AF: Finding teachable people and treating them right.

MR: Yes, exactly. For instance, I've used the same frame carpenter the last twelve years—pretty much on every job, with very few exceptions. We negotiate his rate every January, so when we have a big project that comes up, we look at it together and pretty much know how long things will take. We plug in a value into the spreadsheet for the budget. But if it takes longer, I pay him more. And if it takes less, he leaves earlier, and we have money that goes back into the contingency for my client. My clients are cost-plus. And I tell them that they bear the risk of some price increases. But what that nets them is a really excellent job that's done well, and people are going to get paid fairly for their job. Working with the same tradespeople has been invaluable.

AF: How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced people's thinking about high-performance homes, especially in regards to air quality?

MR: I think the pandemic has been really good for high-performance builders. Number one, people are paying attention to their indoor spaces more. My wife is on the school board, and toward the start of the pandemic she got an email from one of the moms asking if she knew the MERV rating on the school's HVAC system. I think it is fantastic that a parent is even asking and would know what to do with the number even if she was given one. So, people have at least some knowledge of filtration—enough to ask what the MERV rating is. I don't think that kind of attention to indoor-

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air quality would have happened without the pandemic.

AF: There really is a visceral, palpable difference in the air quality of a high-performance home.

MR: That's right. It is really hard to explain without experiencing it firsthand. There's something Steve Baczek says to the argument that "houses need to breathe"—he says, "It's not breathing unless the wind is blowing." So, what happens if you have a day of still weather? Now you've got no fresh air. My supertight house has a fresh-air system constantly delivering MERV 15-filtered, dehumidified air.

AF: I remember taking Joe Lstiburek's class on The Perfect Wall and thinking there wasn't anything in it about water and capillary action that I didn't learn in

high school. How is it the entire building industry has been so misaligned with basic physics for so long?

MR: Part of it is short-term thinking. American culture thinks about a house for about five years, and that's about it, because that's how long our warranty is going to be for a builder and that's how long the homeowner is going to live in it. And then the other part is our economic wealth as a nation and our ability to purchase things has made our houses a commodity. That's a bummer. It means we are incentivized to build cheap.

AF: A house becomes a financial product, not a home.

MR: If we knew a house was going to be in a family for another generation or two, I think we would do things very differently. And that's the mindset they have in Europe. That's what I love when I go over there and see what they're doing.

I went to the Bau trade show in Germany two years ago, and there's not one asphalt shingle to be had. And I tried, just to see. The attitude is: Why would I put a 30-year shingle on a roof? It's stupid. I'm going to do ceramic or metal, and that's it. Those are your only choices, really. When you go to the roof-supply store, the gutters in stock are copper. There are no garbage products. There are no cheaper-than products. You need new gutters? Well, you save up, and you buy copper, because that's the right material to use for gutters. I love that attitude.

I tell my clients, "There are times when I'm going to put the house's priorities, and what it needs, above your own. Especially when it comes to the budget." And that's one of them: I'm not going to let a client put an asphalt-shingle roof on their house. Because I think that's putting their priorities over the house's priorities. On the other hand, if they want to use Formica countertops in the kitchen, go for it! Even your \$200-per-sq.-ft. marble from Italy is going to be out of style in five or 10 years, so I could care less about that. Regularly in Austin, five-year-old houses are getting resold and people are immediately doing million-dollar remodels, because they see styles from five years ago as off-trend. That half-million-dollar kitchen cabinetry and

countertop package is getting sent to the Habitat ReStore.

AF: That's crazy.

MR: Totally crazy. That's why I aim to build a really good envelope. They aren't going to remodel the envelope in five years, but most likely they are going to rip the kitchen out, so whatever you want to do there, I'm totally fine with. When it comes to the envelope—things that matter, like what I might get sued on when it comes to water intrusion—I'm going to put my foot down and say, "Look, we are going to do this, because this is the right thing to do for you, for the house, and for Austin, Texas."

AF: On Twitter, you recently quoted James Joyce: "Mistakes are the portals of discovery." Could you talk to us about the value of mistakes?

MR: Oh man, so many failures. All of my more popular videos are my mistake videos. I did one recently about five mistakes I made when I remodeled my house 15 years ago; things I wish I had been smarter about or things I didn't know that came back to bite me. So many mistakes over the years.

AF: It's interesting that they're so popular.

MR: The building world is nothing but mistakes. There's no perfect house. It's what you do with mistakes and how you avoid them. It's one of the reasons I love building science. Buildings will fail given the right set of physics, so we should probably know what those things are, so that we can do our best to avoid them. The number-one reason for construction-defect litigation is water. That's 80% of everything that's out there being litigated. So, we should probably be experts in water.

AF: That's counterintuitive! One would think you need to be an expert in wood or something like that.

MR: Nope. Just water. Just water and what it does. If you're good at that, then everything else will kind of fall in line.

AF: How did The Build Show Network come to pass?

MR: It's an extension of The Build Show. A lot of that was born from two things. When I started my company in 2005, I had a group

of mentors who were about 20 years older than me; they took me under their wing and let me take them to lunch once a month to ask questions. They were so generous with their time, which was invaluable for

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me as a young builder. The second thing is I felt like *Fine Homebuilding* and *JLC* were very New England-based at the time and weren't putting out a lot of content about how to build a really good house in a hot, humid climate.

The Build Show Network has been about getting like-minded people on board to shoot their version of The Build Show, and that has allowed me to further the mission of teaching that next generation of builders how to build better. My desire would be to have about 15 to 20 builders, remodelers, or architects on the network in the coming years in all different climates and areas of North America.

AF: Cape Cods were a direct innovative response to building on this side of the Atlantic. So much of our built environment now appears incompatible with its environment.

MR: One hundred percent. When Frank Lloyd Wright built modern houses, they leaked like a sieve. Most modernist buildings were pretty terrible, uncomfortable and leaky. And now we like that style, and chemistry can overcome some of those issues with really good peel-and-sticks and membranes and roofing. But will they last? Only time will tell. Some tried-and-true aesthetics don't have to so heavily rely on the forgiveness of amazing chemistry to stay together.

AF: You used to build your houses to the standards of the Austin Energy Green Building program; has that changed?

MR: I don't rate my houses with their program anymore. This is not a knock on them, but I don't like how those types of programs are so checklist-based. I've gravitated toward Passive House [PHIUS] certification. I love that it's a performance standard. They don't care about how you get there as long as you get there. You can do a bike rack or not, they don't care. What they care about is performance. And you have to prove you can meet their energy-efficiency standard. I like that.

I am taking the path to certify my house, which is under construction now, through PHIUS, and that will be the first my company has done. It's not an easy process. There are a lot of hoops to jump through, and hopefully I'll make it. Nonetheless, it has been really fun to dig into their principles and really understand the certification process. And I love that they've now adapted their performance standards based on climate zone. Because a house in Texas is not a house in Germany where Passive House originated.

AF: What's on the horizon given this precarious moment we are in?

MR: I'm pretty bullish on the future. I'm an optimist by nature. As a result of the pandemic there's more and more interest in better-built houses. I feel like builders are interested in building better and clients are interested in them building better for them. I feel like we have a good future.

AF: How would you summarize the long-term vision for the Build Show Network?

MR: Increase mentorship in our industry. Social media allows that to some extent, but there is only a limited amount of back and forth on that. As I grow my network, I have some ideas about doing more to draw young people into the trades through training and mentorship. I see that as a huge looming disaster in our country. We are already taking some good steps toward averting that outcome, and I want to be a part of that. □

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).