The **Fine Homebuilding** Interview

Gary Katz

A master carpenter and pioneering educator teaches us that the best way to learn is to never stop being a student

BY AARON FAGAN

For more than 30 years, Gary Katz, a licensed general contractor based in Oregon, has specialized in every aspect of finish carpentry. He has been a pioneering presenter at national trade shows and lumberyards, and has taught everything from basic techniques to advanced design and joinery to generations of carpenters.

A prolific contributor to leading trade magazines and finish-carpentry forums, he is also the author of *The Doorhanger's Handbook* (The Taunton Press, 1998) and *Finish Carpentry: Efficient Techniques for Custom Interiors* (JLC/Craftsman, 2001). More recently, Gary launched THISisCarpentry.com, described by carpenter and author Craig Savage as "today's version of the pamphlets carpenters read in the 18th century." Written by carpenters for carpenters, the site offers detailed, illustrated articles about construction techniques as well as a community to those looking to improve their carpentry skills.

AF: You have remained active in the building industry through a long and dynamic period of its development. What are some of the most interesting changes you have witnessed?

GK: I would compare them to the changes that occurred in my father's or your father's lifetime—it's dramatic. For example, I've been working on this little meditation-deck project down by the river near my house here in Oregon. I bought a cordless rotary hammer with a 2-ft.-long, 1-in. carbide bit with which I was able to drill 18-in. holes into solid rock in minutes. Then I bought two-part epoxy in a caulking tube with a special tip that mixed it automatically as I filled the holes and stuck in rebar that I cut with a chop saw with a metal-cutting blade. Then I used cardboard Sonotube and scribed it to the rock, instead of having to build some plywood form for the footing. There were some gaps at the bottom of the tube, so I used closed-cell expansive foam to fill them in. It just goes on and on. None of that stuff existed when I was a kid.

AF: It's hard to imagine how someone would have executed a project like that on one's own.

GK: Next to where I'm putting this deck there is an old bolt embedded in the rock—it must be an inch and a half in diameter with a steel plate on it. It's all rusted and bent over. The gold miners who came through here in the late 19th or early 20th century probably had some kind of a dredge or maybe even a little bridge secured to that bolt in the bedrock. I look at that thing frequently. You can't help but imagine how much effort and work they went through to place that thing. And here I am, able to put those footings in alone in less than a day.

AF: You were able to use the skills of several people as one person.

GK: It used to be even more that way. It may appear that I'm using all these different skill sets from the example I just gave, but if you look at it through a historical lens, it reminds me of my dad's carpenters who used to do everything. They would come on the job and set the forms for the concrete, and they'd pour the concrete. They'd set the steel, and supervise the excavators. Then they'd come back to frame the house. Then they'd come back after the plasterers and electricians and trades had done their jobs and set the finish. They would build the cabinets right there on the job. *They* did everything. That day is definitely done.

AF: Even the distinction between a framing carpenter and a finish carpenter didn't come until after WWII.

GK: Precisely—not until true production building stepped into high gear with the postwar boom brought about by the VA housing and education program for veterans. That's what really fueled the specialization trend. It started in Southern California with production framers and finish crews. Slowly but surely, you'd encounter a crew that just hung doors or just built stairs.

AF: Social media does a lot to educate building professionals and clients alike

Drawing: Joe Ciardiello

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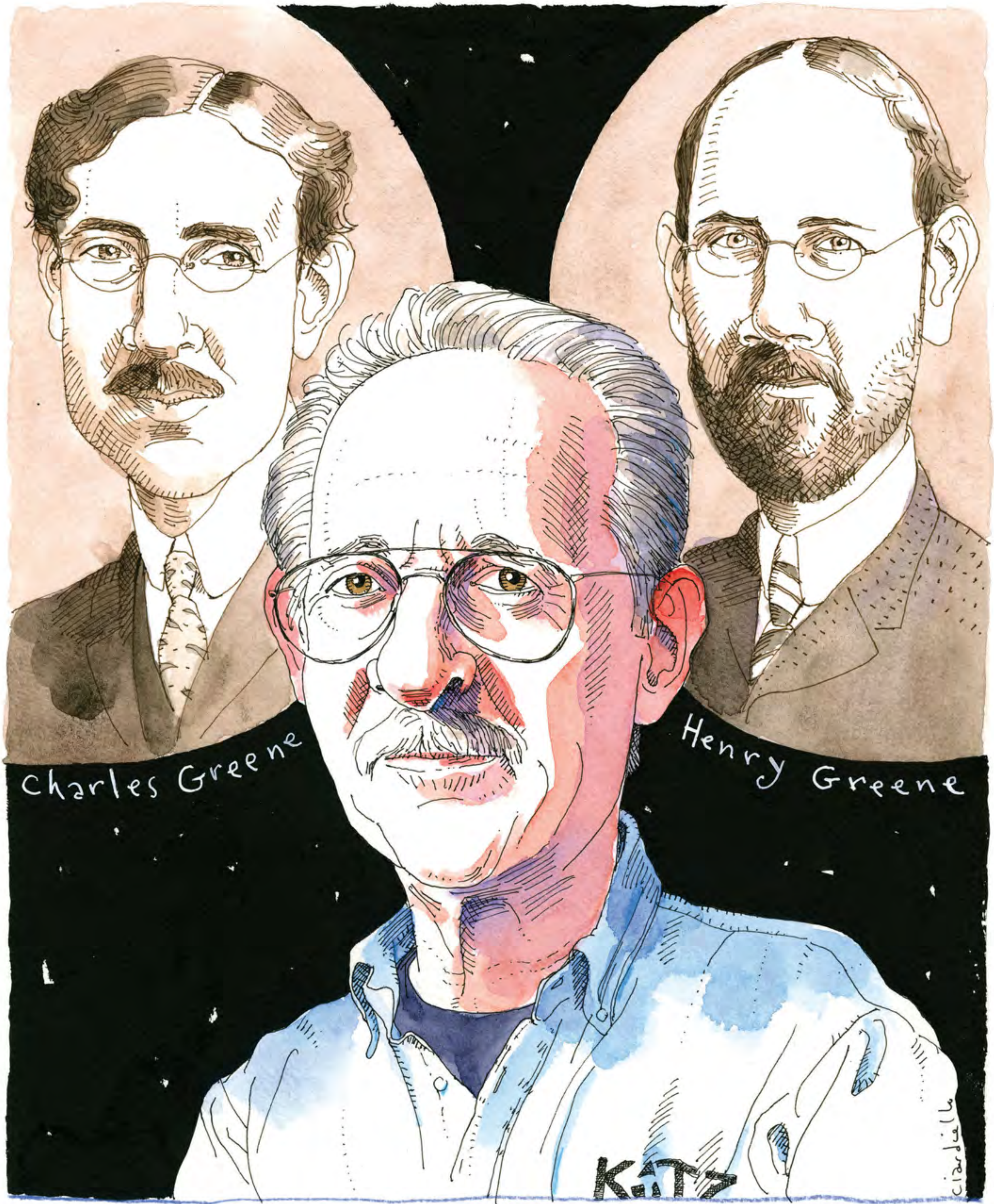

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about what quality craftsmanship is. Can you talk about using education as part of a business model?

GK: I love the phrase "marketing through education." Twenty years ago, I toyed around with that idea in various ways and it became the secret sauce of the Katz Roadshow, which was the only national, hands-on, peer-to-peer series of carpentry clinics, hosted at lumberyards all over the United States. We depended on marketing through education for our success. We convinced all these manufacturers to support the roadshow with what I thought at the time were big dollars. It cost tens of thousands of dollars for each sponsor to support our program, and we produced 20 to 30 events every year. People would come in for a whole day of serious, hands-on training with professionals. The companies supported it because they wanted to sell their products.

Some of the lumberyards had been hesitant to bring our sponsors' products in, which is one reason the shows were valuable to the manufacturers for what they call "pull through." The idea is that if we used the products, the audience would realize the benefits and ask the lumberyard to bring those products into the store. Of course, many of the sponsors also wanted to support the show because their number-one problem was improper installation: improper flashing techniques or incompatible sealants and on and on. They wanted to get the word out on how to properly install their products. It spares both builders and manufacturers time, money, and damaged reputations.

All of it, the secret to the whole thing, was marketing through education. It stunned me to find myself in this position, keeping people in their seats for a whole day and simultaneously using a variety of different products without making it look like a sales thing. We stuck to real solid techniques while using a company's products. It was a perfectly balanced program.

That's what's neat right now. I see it today—companies supporting people on Instagram who are really teaching other people serious stuff. And occasionally they use a product by that company, but they're not focusing on supporting the company or product promotion, they are focusing on techniques, instruction, and education. These companies are seeing folks with 300,000 followers, and they want to get their products into the hands of those influencers. It's remarkable what social media is doing for our trade.

AF: What is your advice to young people trying to educate themselves?

GK: Until you discover the real motivation inside of you, you're not going to be educated. You won't learn anything until you are truly motivated from the inside. What that motivation is doesn't matter. If you are motivated by money, great. If you are motivated by desire, wonderful, that's even better. Whatever it is, you need real fuel to drive you. When you grow from your mistakes as a carpenter, you evolve as a person.

AF: Where are you at in your own evolution and education as a carpenter?

GK: It would be fair to say carpentry is still pursuing me. I can't get away from it. I just love it. I love making stuff. I'm glad I'm a carpenter. These days—while I'm still working almost every day in my shop or on something around my place—I am trying to finish a book I started 20 years ago on American mantel pieces. And to do it, I've been having an enormously good time researching architecture and learning more about architectural history and period styles, and putting together a lot of missing pieces of my puzzle.

> *"When you grow from your mistakes as a carpenter, you evolve as a person."*

I have tried for decades to understand why certain architectural styles make me feel giddy and why certain architectural ornaments stick in my mind like Devils Tower did for Richard Dreyfuss's character in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The Craftsman stuff has driven me crazy—the cloud lift and the waterfall brackets. All that kind of stuff that the Greene brothers originated and borrowed from Japan and the Victorian architects. It has driven me nuts. They learned a lot about it from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where they were exposed to the Japanese pavilion. So were Frank Lloyd Wright and the architects McKim, Mead, &White. I'd always thought the Greene brothers came up with those ideas out of thin air. Or that Frank Lloyd Wright came up with the prairie style all on his own. But this past year, with the studying I have been doing, I see there is a clear evolutionary line. Each one of those ingenious inventions has an evolutionary tail. It has been fantastic to see that and learn to recognize it. I don't know if I will ever finish my mantelpiece book, but boy has that project been a winner for me.

AF: Asher Benjamin's handbooks had a nearly ubiquitous influence on early American architecture, and that influence persists in many ways. Who was he to you?

GK: He was a profiteer and a plagiarist. Asher Benjamin plagiarized Sir William Chambers's books in an egregious way. He didn't just take a paragraph here and there, he took whole chapters and published them verbatim with the same illustrations and called them his own. He never gave Chambers any credit at all—none. You read any good architectural historian like Vincent Scully, and they'll tell you the truth about who Asher Benjamin really was. He had an enormous impact on the whole classical drift of architecture in the United States, primarily because he was so driven to be seen as an authority. He published the same kind of stuff over and over again, and republished his books. He was good at marketing and sales. All the way through the 19th century, that whole extension of the Federal and classical styles—some people call it "academic style"—was largely dependent upon people like him and him specifically.

Yeah, I think his homes were wonderful. I have an incredible appreciation for the Greek-revival, classical, Georgian, and Federal styles. I go nuts over them because they're so perfect. But if you idolize his

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homes, then you're not recognizing the real essence of architecture, which goes way beyond those styles that are so common in the New England area.

I think a lot of folks out there bought into this partly because of writers like Asher Benjamin, and unfortunately they still aren't able to truly appreciate what the early Victorian architects accomplished. I mean, how many of those neat old Federal and Georgian homes have a front porch? Or a back porch? Or even something you might call a veranda where you can put your chairs and sit outside to enjoy a sunset or sunrise? None. Those houses didn't have them. They didn't have stuff like that because they were classically inspired boxes that were cut up inside into little boxes. Whereas in the mid-1800s, architects like Andrew Jackson Downing and Henry Hobson Richardson embodied that style of building homes that expressed what made humans comfortable. They brought the outdoors indoors and the indoors outdoors. That was huge. They built verandas all the way around a house like they did down in the South. Federal homes in the South had these huge verandas all the way around a house—you couldn't live without one.

AF: Speaking of appreciating accomplishments, who are some figures we should never forget?

GK: The Greene's homes should all be museum houses and never be threatened. Frank Lloyd Wright's houses should never be threatened either, even though he was a terrible builder. His houses leak like a sieve and his cantilevers were totally overextended and unsupported. To repair, fix, and save many of his homes would be a gargantuan amount of money—many would have to be pretty much rebuilt.

Then you have to go back to the 1850s and '60s and save stuff even earlier than that. We've already lost a lot of those houses. I never knew who Downing and Richardson were. I never knew that McKim, Mead & White originally designed revolutionary homes. I think those houses need to be saved. Personally, I believe more effort should be made to expose people to those revolutionary and beautiful ideas and a little less energy put into trying to educate people about the classical orders. Sure, it's important for people to understand the Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite orders, their differences, and what makes them proportionate and all that, but there's also other things that are truly equally important, and that's the part of the art form that's a bit more human. People like Asher Benjamin and the proponents of the academic style say it's all based on human proportion and it's natural. But it's not based on human proportion and it's not natural, it's a temple. It's all based on temples. Temples aren't made to be lived in. Temples are places of worship. I am not demeaning religion. I'm saying we're not gods, we're humans; and to be comfortable, we need to create homes that are more human.

> *"...it's not the finished thing that ultimately turns you on the most, it's what you learn from doing it."*

AF: What's your favorite thing to work on?

GK: I really enjoy working on something that's way over my head, that I've never done before, and that I have little chance of succeeding at, which frankly is pretty easy to find. I really like working on stuff that I don't feel I need to finish right away so that it can sit in different stages while I absorb what's going on or it absorbs me more. I guess that's a good way of putting it: It absorbs me. I'm able to allow the project to evolve before I force its completion. It changes because of that.

Take this deck I am doing down at the river—such a perfect example. It's just a little project, yet so compelling in a way. I've already installed the deck boards. I did it really quickly once I got the joists up. I put ice-and-water strips on top of all the joists. I used hidden fasteners. I bought the decking material from this company I've worked with in the past named Thermory, which makes thermally modified decking. I used products I believe in. Instead of using some composite decking or plastic or whatever, I wanted to use wood.

It's right next to the water, and it's beautiful—it's more than you can handle sometimes, it's so overwhelmingly glorious. I wanted to put my yoga mats right above where the water comes out and over some rocks into a pool right at this deck, and I kind of hurried to put the deck boards down so I could start using it right away.

I put them down, but I didn't want to cut the ends off until I sat with it for a while and decided what the final shape should be because it's tucked between these big bedrock outcroppings. I kept thinking, one side should be scribed a couple inches from the rock all the way, so it looks like it came out of the rock but doesn't touch it. And the other side should be straight so it's angular. And then a friend pointed out that it will be under water when the river comes up every year and it would be good if I could remove a few of the deck boards. It would reduce some of the hydraulic pressure on the uplift as the river's rising. And I thought, what a good idea. Then I realized, thinking about it a few days more, what a bother it would be unscrewing those boards because eventually the screws would rust or strip or snap off. Then it dawned on me that I should take three or four boards and panelize them, put 2x4s under them that land in between the joists bays, and then screw the deck boards to those so you can lift the whole panel out. And don't bother screwing the panel down, it won't move. Just lift the panel out each year before the river comes up above it.

That's the kind of thing I really enjoy: having the time to allow some of my projects to evolve and cook, and me to learn from them, because it's not the finished thing that ultimately turns you on the most, it's what you learn from doing it. We learn in little pieces throughout our lives, but it's not until we have the opportunity to let go of the completion that we truly understand the value of that experience—how much we learn from waiting and patience. □

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).

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