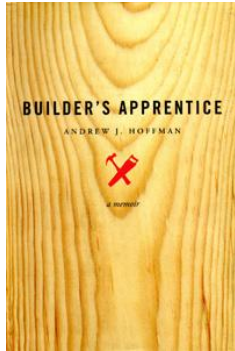


the ann arbor chronicle

it's like being there

Ann Arbor, Michigan

May 29, 2010



Book cover for "Builder's Apprentice," published by Huron River Press.

Book Fare: "Builder's Apprentice"

Andy Hoffman reflects on crafting a custom-built life

By [Domenica Trevor](#)

May 29, 2010

It is both a luxury and a curse of modern life to be doing "all the right things" while fearing you've missed something vital along that road not taken. Andy Hoffman, a University of Michigan professor and author of "Builder's Apprentice," confronted that suspicion in the mid-1980s while mulling grad school offers from Harvard and Berkeley.

As he prepared to graduate with a bachelor's degree ("grades thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen") in chemical engineering, Hoffman writes, he "fumbled" through interviews with prospective employers: "I had assumed that recruiters would tell me what I was supposed to do for them. ... I would be guided on to the next step in life." He took a job with the Environmental Protection Agency, "generating paperwork" for two years, and assumed that the next step – and the cure for his aimlessness – would be graduate school in public policy.

But what he really wanted to do was build houses.

And so he does. Hoffman gets his start in the business when, well, when a recruiter tells him what he's supposed to do. Jack, a contractor advertising for carpenters, is willing to take a gamble on a young guy whose experience in the construction industry consists of helping his girlfriend's father build a deck. Hoffman is green, but he's eager, smart and honest – a rare mix of assets in the construction business, as Jack well knows.

Hoffman eventually figures this out, too – along with many other things that are not specific to slicing wood and hammering nails. He marvels at the drifters, migrants and occasionally scary misfits who hire onto the construction crews. He takes the measure of the architects, clients and occasionally scary subcontractors he encounters on the job sites. He admires the artistry and street-smarts of the cement boss, of an Italian stonemason, and of a fellow named Benjamin who buries his money in mason jars, dodges a Social Security number and holds up progress on a house by insisting his men cut their joints "so you can't slip a piece of paper between them."

And while Hoffman glories in Jack's increasing faith in his abilities, he also comes to terms with Jack's bottom line: Business is business. Hoffman encounters a whole new world and he's thrilled not only by what he finds, but by his own determination to seek it out in the first place.

The Scent of Pine

Hoffman names each house he builds after the man who's paying for it. He learns his craft working on the Rogers house, a sprawling place in Nantucket. The Winslow house in Connecticut is next, a much bigger and more complicated site where Hoffman acts as Jack's "eyes and ears on the job." When Jack takes over construction of the Shaw house, he puts Hoffman – who is first stunned and then juiced – in charge of a mammoth structure whose ridgeline "rose at least fifty feet from the first-floor deck," required steel infrastructure and featured seven fireplaces and "two cylindrical turrets on either side of the front door ... at least twenty feet in diameter" that rose the full height of the house.

The best reading in "Builder's Apprentice" comes from Hoffman's recollections of the scent of fresh lumber and the beauty of a fine grain; about his faith in "level, plumb and square"; about the deep satisfaction in beholding the tangible results of hard, physical work directed by disciplined intelligence:

... I was never happier. The sugar pine was a sensual pleasure, unlike any other wood we'd used on the job so far. The surface was like felt, smooth and soft on my hands. The grain of each board possessed a unique beauty, the dark strands bending and swirling like waves of smoke drifting in a gentle breeze.

Hoffman is also very good at describing his encounters with a few nonsense-spewing architects in thrall to their own exquisite aesthetic. But not all of them are twits, and "Builder's Apprentice" may have been a better book if its author had heeded Mies van der Rohe: "Less is more."

Ann Arbor-based [Huron River Press](#) has produced a beautiful volume with a handsome jacket, elegant fonts and design, and only a few typos of the kind that have obviously slipped past the spell-check. (One appears, excruciatingly, in the very first paragraph of the prologue; anyone who has ever written anything for publication can only weep in empathy.)

But flabby dialogue and cluttered prose slow the first two chapters to such a plod that some readers may be tempted give up. The narrative that moves Hoffman's people from place to place and moment to moment – in other words, some of the really heavy lifting for any writer – is often painfully tedious. An example: "The heavy plane pulled to a stop and the two engines quit their violent labor by exhausting one last gasp of smoke." Hoffman has arrived in Nantucket and, in this case, that's all we need to know.

A seasoned line editor or copy editor could have made a real difference here. But such attention has become an extravagance for many academic and trade publishers, not to mention what's left of newspapers and magazines. If this was the case for "Builder's Apprentice" and Huron River Press, then that's too bad. (If not, there's a copy editor out there who needs to review the basic rules governing the use of commas.)

The Morality of Desire

Hoffman is the [Holcim Professor of Sustainable Enterprise](#) at UM; he has a joint appointment with the Ross School of Business and the School of Natural Resources and Environment, and is associate director of the [Erb Institute](#). He has written a number of books about the growing influence of environmental considerations in corporate decision-making. So I came to "Builder's Apprentice" with the reasonable

expectation of a mea culpa, that somewhere along the way I would witness a simple carpenter's epiphany as he beholds in his finished work a monument to extravagance for its own sake.

That's not what we get here – and that's fine. The story of Hoffman's journey from Shaw house to "sustainable enterprise" has the makings of a compelling sequel. But reading "Builder's Apprentice," you can't help but feel some ambivalence because Hoffman masters the work he loves while he's building massive homes for the massively rich – and with nary a hint of reflection on any broader implications. But the morality of imagining, desiring, and spending millions of dollars to design and erect a monstrous house isn't what Hoffman wants to explore this time. So, ultimately, this is what we root for:

I looked to my side and eyed down the line of shingles the roofers had just finished nailing off. To my shock, they weren't straight! In fact, none of the courses were straight. The crew wasn't even using a straight edge. I watched as they nailed them down freehand. ... I climbed over to the foreman.

"What's up? Those courses're crooked."

"No one's gonna be able to see 'em up here. What difference does it make?"

I looked at the foreman in firm resolve. "I want 'em straight."

"That'll take too long," he protested.

"That's not my problem, is it? Look at this house. Do you really think we're gonna accept second-rate quality? ... We have a contract and that contract calls for a quality roof. So that's what I want."

A shingle, a roof, a house; a word, a book, a life. Hoffman discovered what was worth doing, and that doing it well was what made all the difference.

Andy Hoffman will read from "Builder's Apprentice" at 7 p.m. Thursday, June 10, at Borders bookstore, 612 E. Liberty Street in downtown Ann Arbor. [Click here](#) to watch a video of Hoffman discussing his memoir, or read [the most recent in a series of columns](#) by Hoffman, based on "Builder's Apprentice," on the Harvard Business Review blog, "The Conversation."

About the writer: Domenica Trevor is a voracious reader who lives in Ann Arbor and has never built a house herself, but does live in one.

Source: <http://annarborchronicle.com/2010/05/29/book-fare-builders-apprentice/>