

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

## The Essential Education of Builder Stories

**Many readers** of *JLC* are familiar with the book *The Elements of Building* by Mark Kerson. It captures the essence of the business of building, distilled into graspable ideas that reflect true experience and the rich layers of what makes the business of building homes different from other businesses. *The Elements* is a must-read for anyone running a building company or contemplating getting into the business. Matt Risinger wrote an engaging review of that book in *JLC* in October 2016, and I would have asked him to write the review of Kerson's latest book, *Builder*, except for the fact that Risinger is one of the subjects.

In his new book, Kerson adopts a completely different style from the one he used for his first book, and with it, he reveals different dimensions of the same thing: what it means to be a builder. Those who are familiar with Studs Terkel—the author who pioneered storytelling in his seminal book *Working* as a way to write true history and reveal an authentic account of labor in late-20th-century America—will recognize the style that Kerson has adopted for his latest venture. The narrative is divided up into chapters named for “builders”—individuals that made or make a living working on new or existing homes—and each provides an important history of the trade.

For starters, let me express my gratitude to Kerson for choosing this title. Whether we build in new or existing homes, we all identify as builders. The industry has become unnecessarily fractured by splitting off “remodelers” to a separate industry. A minority of firms work exclusively on existing homes. The majority of those who do work on existing homes build large additions or new homes, custom or on spec, as well as perform kitchen and bath remodels, gut rehabs, restorations, and other “builds.” Production builders who function primarily as developers are perhaps outliers—and they are missing in Kerson's book, which is one minor flaw—but they too deserve to be included. They, like all builders, celebrate their roles as providers of an essential human staple. Builders of homes of all kinds have more to gain from focusing on this role, and joining one industry, than

they do pursuing separate identities based on the relative condition of homes. Creating a sense of home is the universal quest we all share and the fundamental quality every client seeks. Kerson's book goes a long way towards defining the center of the profession providing that quality.

To the larger public, *Builder* seems destined to sit alongside Tracy Kidder's *House*, not only to inspire active and prospective carpenters, trade contractors, and custom builders (as it was inspirational to my early career), but also to reveal to the larger world what it means to build, beyond the stereotypes and biases that lurk in the general population. It is my deep hope that *Builder*, like *House*, creeps into the consciousness of the American public and continues to erode the image cast by too many news articles that focus on “contractor as scam artist” and not enough on “contractor as craftsman.” We need more stories in the world that celebrate builders driven by compassionate human concerns, which *Builder* does best of all.

The narrative, based on in-person interviews and punctuated by headings that reveal the author's questions, flows like a conversation. We as readers are treated to a sit-down with some of the best and brightest in the field.

I am not a fan of celebrities. Indeed, “celebrity,” which elevates public figures based on how relentless at messaging and bombastic they are over any other quality, is a phenomenon that social media is designed to promote. The format in *Builder*, while text heavy, forces us down another path. By reading unadulterated text, we are driven to contemplate the substance and experience of the individual “speaking”; it's a refreshing antidote to modern media.

The cast of characters we are invited to sit down with includes some of my favorites—friends, mentors, and heroes of our industry, including Sal Alfano, Dan Kolbert, Matt Risinger, David Gerstel, Heather Thompson, Jesper Kruse, and Iris Harrell, who have all contributed to *JLC*. And there are others, each one a voice in the great conversation that builders throughout time have joined and that this collection brings forward in modern history.

