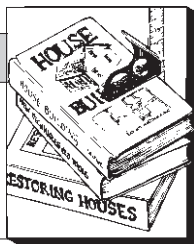


Two References For Renovators

by Paul Hanke



Renovation: A Complete Guide (2nd Edition) by Michael Litchfield (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1991; 515/284-6751). 541 pages. Hardcover, 8 1/2 x 11. \$38.

In 1984, I gave Michael Litchfield's *Renovation: A Complete Guide* a mixed review. Now there's a new, expanded version which the author asserts "may be the most comprehensive single volume on residential renovation ever attempted." In fact, there aren't many home renovation tasks you won't find addressed in this edition. New chapters address tiling, foundation repair, and installing doors, windows, and skylights. There are also revised illustrations, extensive text rewrites, and appendices on dealing with contractors, architects, money, security, stair building, and even fencing, plus a short bibliography.

Much of this collection is as good as you'll get anywhere. I wouldn't hesitate, for example, to use Litchfield's chapter on electricity as my first reference, and his treatment of tiling is first rate. But, as in the original edition, some areas are weak, like the too-brief section on seismic retrofits, the span tables for structural lumber that are inexplicably taken from Canadian sources, and an illustration showing clapboards nailed through *both* layers, which is contrary to all the industry literature I consulted.

Despite the great number of practical tips sprinkled throughout the book (such as how to use a strongback to level sagging ceiling joists) and the information gleaned from the hundreds of trade practitioners Litchfield spoke to, a sense of naivete about renovation work pervades the book. Everything seems too easy, as if Litchfield had spoken to many experts but had little or no practical experience himself. This makes *Renovation* read too much like a textbook, in which snafus are never mentioned. I also didn't get much sense of appreciation for old houses despite photos of beautiful trim work and fixtures. These shortcomings don't seriously detract from *Renovation* as a resource on the practical side of fixing up old houses. But read on before you buy.



Renovating Old Houses by George Nash (Taunton Press, 1992; 800/888-8286). 338 pages. Hardcover, 8 1/2 x 11. \$37.95.

If Michael Litchfield is the Joe Friday ("Just the facts, Ma'am") of renovation, George Nash is the Walt Whitman. He captures in words and photos the spirit of remaking old houses while providing huge amounts of down-to-earth information. Nash also tries to "chart the psychic waters" of rebuilding, acknowledging that a marriage or self image can run aground during renovation, and wisely noting the need for a "calm temperament and a sense of humor" along with the usual time and money.

Although not a strict preservationist, Nash is sensitive to the issues of what he calls "remuddling" (ie., adding picture windows to a Cape) and "technotrashing" (ie., using solar technology where it is aesthetically inappropriate). The book is strengthened by real-life anecdotes and photo essays. For instance, Nash tells how pouring his own cellar slab one summer day resembled a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. Nash also makes it clear that there is little correspondence between new construction and renovation, and that the reality of the problems you find is often much worse than anything you could have imagined, a perspective that is noticeably absent from Litchfield's book.

On the technical side, Nash outshines Litchfield again. He leads the reader through such topics as building diagnostics (with many photos of symptoms), jacking, scribing new work to old, and safely cutting joists, to name a few. There are bloopers, of course, like suggesting straw as an alternative to filter fabric, recommending full lengths of corrugated metal roofing (shorter runs minimize stress on fasteners), and the befuddled contention that "a saltbox is nothing more than a Cape with a shed dormer." Nonetheless, if I had to pick a single book for the aspiring renovator, *Renovating Old Houses* would be it — hands down. ■

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