More Than Just Knowledge

By DAVID L. PERKINS, AIA

If, through some mystical aberration of time, a housebuilding operation of the 18th or 19th century should be transported onto a present-day construction site, it would certainly be challenging. Anyone who could believe, even understand, all that would be seen.

Electric saws and routers and joints whacking up ready-planed lumber at a fast pace. Today's construction is a departure from the tools, jigs, and devices used in the past. Some of the amazing results they produced are still in evidence throughout.

The moldings, under many layers of ancient paint, show chatter marks and irregularities the modern planes of the same type could produce. The pounding necessary to cut teeth on the modern planes was done in the days before electricity. The block plane, with the iron, was held the delicate blade taut. The operator would swing the blade down between his legs, peeling off a shaving with each stroke.

In the lobby of the Industrial Architecture building at LSU is a fascinating display of old time planes. These planes work just as well as our modern steel planes, except that the body of the plane is made of wood and the blade, or "iron," is held in place by wooden wedges.

Apple wood or beech was the preferred material for plane blades, and in a few cases, the blades were made of iron. These planes were used for cutting things like a hoe. The Operator would swing the blade down between his legs, peeling off a shaving with each stroke.

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