Book Review
by
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Renovation: a Complete Guide, Michael W. Litchfield, Prentice-Hall 1991, 2d Ed. ISBN 0-13-159336-6. 640 pages. $29.95. Single copy orders 201-767-5937.

"Thar's gold in them thar hills." "All that glitters is not gold." Both of these statements are true concerning Michael Litchfield's second edition of this comprehensive guide to house renovation. Many ASHI Members will recognize Mr. Litchfield's name as the founding editor of Fine Homebuilding Magazine.

Where's the gold? In two places. Mr. Litchfield's book will be of considerable interest to professional home inspectors because of its breadth, and because of the presence of an entire chapter dedicated to "Assessment" of the building roof, exterior, interior, and mechanical systems. For both neophyte and experienced inspectors, prospecting through this volume yields dividends which you'd expect from the founder of a top-quality builders magazine. Details of repair and renovation procedures are helpful in understanding what may have been done to a building and where damage may have occurred, aggravated owners, and been repaired or covered.

One example among many: page 88 describes the proper procedure for putting a second layer of asphalt shingles over old ones. That short starter course is recommended by the National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA). Its absence explains the "lumpy" surface and shorter shingle life on some re-roofing jobs. Virtually every house construction topic and system gets at least some mention, making this an interesting and broad reference.

Where's the glitter that's not gold? Inconsistent depth. Even in a 600-plus page book it's impossible to thoroughly explore all construction topics. The text is often misleading as to the number, scope, and range of defects which occur in different materials and components. A tremendous number of common problems inspectors find on older buildings are simply not mentioned at all.

The author diagnoses sagging ridges as due to too many layers of shingles. What about framing defects? Chimney inspection focuses on mortar and cap, and a flashlight inspection of the flue from the top (fruitless except for the top few feet). What about cracks, curves, soot, cleanouts, separation from the building, leaning, short chimneys?

The author opines that cracks over windows usually indicate foundation failure. Goodness me. Brick walls get one paragraph of inspection with no warning of the severe danger of bulged or bowed brick. Stucco walls which have cracks are diagnosed as a "near sure sign that the structure is shifting." What about flashing, water, frost defects? Stucco always cracks. Cracked window panes are diagnosed as lack of maintenance or evidence that a structure is shifting. What about broken window ropes and falling sashes as a cause?

Inspection tips regarding foundation cracks are incomplete and misleading - no mention of pattern, shape, and relationships among age, cause, activity, amount of movement, direction of movement, and severity.

Heating inspection tips are comprised of four brief paragraphs such as "How energy efficient is it?" and advise that you make a professional inspection part of the contract for purchase. It was encouraging to see this tip even though it was buried in the text. What about obvious visual clues such as leaks, unsafe or unconnected flue vent connectors, and soot?

In a section on roof ventilation the author acknowledges that the small round

soffit vent plugs will pass less air than a continuous strip vent. There is no mention of the effects of reduced ventilation on the building - a concern of ASHI professionals in most climates.

Inspectors will be interested in the home inspection checklist in chapter one. The author, apparently more familiar with with some construction topics than others, suggests greater depth of do-it-yourself inspection in those areas with which he is most familiar. When he gets to inspection of the electrical system, for example, six short paragraphs make short shrift of this topic. One might infer that the variation maps the natural differences in familiarity with different topics which will be discovered in any author or inspector. However the result is misleading to the reader who will may incorrectly infer that the importance of topics is reflected by the amount of text devoted to each. This is not the case. And the implications of choices of materials and methods are seldom explored.

Considering that a copy of this book was sent to ASHI for review and publicity, we were disappointed to find a recap of the inspection procedure (at the end of chapter one) which omits any reference to consulting with a professional ASHI home inspector, with engineering or architectural experts, or with trades professionals or experienced builders.

The book is disappointing in its lack of detail and varying depth regarding building defects and the absence of explanations of the manner in which different building systems and defects interact. The suggestions are those of a good builder, interested in quality, familiar with construction, but unfamiliar with the range and nature of in-service field failures which are found by routine home inspections.

Nonetheless we recommend it as an excellent resource: there is good breadth of coverage and sensible explanation of how some systems and construction methods work which should assist home inspectors both in broadening their familiarity with construction and in explaining their findings to clients.

Rating 3 stars.

Book Ratings Explained:

One star or less: to be collected only by the most ardent enthusiast who wants every book on topic regardless of quality.

Two stars: some useful material, not an essential reference.

Three stars: lots of useful material, a recommended reference, not a seminal authority.

Four stars: no responsible building professional should be without.