



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

Season 2, Episode 6

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Guest: Patrick MCombe

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[intro music]

Katherine: Welcome to *The Fix*, the podcast made for the trades. Where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges and everything in between. I'm your host Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend Doug. One of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. *The Fix* is more than a podcast, it's a community, a community built to support trades people and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

Welcome back listeners, I'm so excited for another great episode of *The Fix*. Doug we've got a really great conversation today and one that continues to be a little bit different. This season two is really changing things up for us. I'm really excited about today.

Doug: Today's guest he is like a four-leaf clover, Katherine. He's bringing, he's got experience, he knows how to talk about it, explain it to the other individuals out there who want to learn about it. He can photograph it and he expects the best possible outcomes on every project he does.

Katherine: I love it. How about that? We now have a four-leaf clover a description. Welcome, Patrick, who is the senior editor at *Fine Homebuilding Magazine*.

Patrick McCombe: Thank you so much for having me here, it's a pleasure.

Katherine: Thank you. I'm curious, have you ever heard that description of yourself before?

Patrick: No, but I'm blushing. Can you see me, I'm turning right over here Doug? Thank you.

Katherine: Wonderful. Hey Patrick, why don't you go ahead and kick it off for us and tell us a little bit about yourself and how you've ended up in the role you're in today?

Patrick: Probably we just had first talk about *Fine Homebuilding*, the brand I work for, a part of the Taunton Press, and for more than 40 years Fine Homebuilding has been the go to resource for folks who care about the craft of homebuilding. The company's motto is inspiration for hands-on living. I think that sums up the products that we produce meant to satisfy the need of folks who need a higher level information for whatever interest they may have, whether it be gardening, sewing, woodworking or home building.

Katherine: That's really cool. How did you start your career within the trades?

Patrick: It is a very long story, but I'll try and keep it brief. I was one of those young people who was out in the woods building treehouses making ramps for my BMX bicycles, taking stuff apart. Probably when I was 10 years old and had grown my little red pedal-powered fire engine my next challenge was to take it completely apart in my parents' basement. I did and my dad came down probably an hour or two later and just was aghast at how I had spread very little fasteners and parts all over the basement taking this thing apart.

Katherine: [laughs]

Patrick: I grew up in the Pittsburgh area in the mid-'80s and in that time the rust belt was probably in its toughest period and a lot of folks who worked with their hands in the Pittsburgh area were suddenly finding themselves out of work because a lot of jobs were moving to Southern part of the US or to Asia. My folks who neither of them went to college, really wanted me to go to college and my guidance counselor pressured me, but I really wanted to be an electrician, but I decided to stick it out.

I went to Slippery Rock University and I took a communication program because I wanted to do something hands on once again. I took a lot of radio and TV production and it would prove to be a wise choice later in my life. When I got out of school, I decided I did not want to sit behind a desk all the time and I started a handyman business. With no business doing that, I took out an ad and a bunch of local newspapers and started my handyman business and I did all kinds of stuff. Painting and electrical wiring, I replaced the water heater, I did some deck building, I did some retaining walls.

I was making a little money and paying back my student loans, but my dad came to me one time and he said, "What are you doing?" I was like, what are you talking about? I had started a business. He's like, "Yes, but do you have health insurance?" I was like, "No." He's like, "Do you want to live in our house for the rest of your life?" I'm like, "No." He's like, "I think you should go check out this organization that recently was in the newspaper in Pittsburgh," and it was Habitat for Humanity. I previously learned about the organization from one of my college professors.

I went and started volunteering there and a little bit later they hired me as a construction supervisor, at first part-time and then full-time and then through no special talent on my own, I was the director of construction by the time I left there, like six years later. Through attrition mostly. I met my wife there at the time and she wanted to move back to Vermont.

I took a job at a lumber yard outside of Burlington and learned that aspect of the industry and that's where I met the editor of JLC, Don Jackson, who was building his own home at the time. He bugged me for a while to come interview for a job on the editorial staff at JLC, which is one of *Fine Homebuilding's* competitors. I didn't take him up on that, but in the time between my starting at JLC, my wife and I bought a house in Stowe, which was about 60 miles away from my lumber yard job and it was proving to be untenable to drive all that way.

I took a job at the local hardware store and I liked the job well enough, I loved helping people solve their problems and fix their stuff around the house. The owner of the business and I butted heads almost immediately and it wasn't a year later that he asked me to leave, and I called up my old friend Don Jackson and got an editorial job at JLC. I loved it and learned how to take photography on job sites, so we could explain to folks who read the publication how to do complex construction methods and learn about construction technologies.

In 2008, when the economy completely tanked, JLC's parent company laid off about half of their editorial staff and I was one of the folks who was let go and I found myself at Taunton Press working at *Fine Woodworking*. I did that for a year and then a position came up at *Fine Homebuilding* and I knew that was my true love, so I applied for that job and that's been 12 and a half years now.

Katherine: Oh, that's wonderful. What really took your schooling as well as then your passion and combined both of them together for you?

Patrick: It's pretty weird. I could have not plotted the career path to get me where I am today, but it seems like all the pieces were there to help, and a lot of great mentors who got me here to where I am.

Doug: That's fantastic Patrick. One of the things me being from the job site world a lot, I used to be able to take a print and I used to be able to read it and talk to my guys about it and we would know what we had to build. I'm completely fascinated by writers and editors, the person that can take a few photographs and a little bit of information and then you can put it down in words and then just absolutely make me close my eyes and see what's going on there. Can you tell me how that process goes through your head?

Patrick: Oh my God, it's a good question Doug and it's one that's probably taken me 10 or more years to figure it out. I guess you try and imagine the information that the person who's going to do this needs? Having a background as a carpenter, I think that helps me to do that.

One of the great things about being an editor at Taunton is we have a lot of tools. The brand has always been recognized for its really good three-dimensional

drawings that can convey a lot of information in a relatively small space. Folks who are in trade work or work with their hands are used to seeing things in 3D, are used to looking at plans, are used to seeing pictures to explain what they need to know. That's one of the tools we use and photographs can teach a lot too. A good photograph that's well with and can demonstrate the step that you're looking at is hugely helpful.

Then the words I think are often the vehicle to explain the why. I choose to do this method or I choose this product because I've used this other one in the past and it didn't work or I tried this method and the inspector didn't like it, or I found this made a huge mess that upset the client. I think if you can pull from these various tools out of the box you learn to use them for what they're best at explaining or how they best explain something.

Doug: I tell you from what I've seen of your work, you do an absolutely fantastic job at that.

Patrick: Oh, thank you.

Katherine: That leads me to a great point. Patrick, how do you keep up on new products and technology? How does that work?

Patrick: It's probably best explained by my own complete nerdiness with the subject area. I do find it of great interest no matter what I'm doing in my life. I was reading *The New York Times* today and I've stumbled across a real estate story about how real estate agents use this flowery language to describe houses and I don't know, I just seemed to gravitate to it, and I love new and problem-solving products because I've had so many struggles in my own projects or working at Habitat, or working for fan friends and family members that I don't know, when you find something that works really good it just clicks on my boxes.

Katherine: Patrick, tell me a little bit too about your relationship on social media with those, you refer to yourself as the serial remodeler and can you tell me a little bit about how that name came to be and how you connect with those on social media?

Patrick: Well, I guess serial remodeler refers to the fact that in the price point of homes my wife and I have bought twice, you need to make some changes, you need to make some improvements. We just can't afford a house that suits all of our needs, or is even-- They've been livable, but barely in the first case and it's just a matter of fixing things to your needs as time and money allow, and I think it helps keep me grounded in the work I do.

I think it's really easy for folks and who've worked for *Fine Homebuilding* or other construction media to over glamorize the work. It seems very glamorous, but sometimes it's awful. It's horrible weather, it's just back-breaking work. I think we need to be reminded of that to be useful in our jobs is that sometimes the easy solution is a good one and that's okay.

Katherine: Right. No, that's a great perspective. I think showing people all the different sides is really important, not the one that you see on HGTV where everything appears like that next day, right?

Patrick: My colleagues and I like to remind ourselves that we show the hard parts, it's the part that the folks really need to know, that is glossed over in those home improvement shows on cable television. What happens when you open up the wall, and there's a drain line there is an example? Or a giant electrical cable running to an air handler, that makes great television because it's drama, but somebody has to fix that. [crosstalk]

Doug: Absolutely, that's where, Patrick, the true technicians come out, because anybody can build something in a vanilla box. Like my dad used to tell me when we were growing up, I could build anything out of square and make it work. He says, you're going to definitely be a technician, probably someday but the thing is, vanilla box television, it looks great but unfortunately, it encourages a lot of people to attempt projects at once they get into them, and they have no place to go.

That's why it's so important for our professionals to constantly be out there advertising, and then learning themselves as they go. One of the questions I have is, with you being such a great writer, and person that can show the images mentally through there, why did you decide to go with the podcast?

Patrick: I love talking to people, I really do and I didn't start the fine homebuilding podcast, but I really enjoyed being on it. I think it became a natural fit for me to start hosting it. I guess I just love talking about home improvement with my peers. It was the genesis of the fine home building podcast was, we would sit around at the lunch table, and I'll talk about our own projects, and offer building science consulting or construction techniques to each other, and other folks found it entertaining to who may have been at other tables.

I might be projecting a little bit there, but it seemed like it would be a good fit for a podcast and they were taking off at the time and a Q&A show is a natural, intimate forum for a podcast, and it just seemed like a good fit. I think maybe my communication background performing for camera, writing scripts. I'm sure that helped me to a degree, but I think perhaps the single biggest thing is just a great interest in the subject matter.

Doug: Okay. Well, I used to find that the technicians in the field, I'd have one of three individuals, I'd have an individual that I could talk to. He would visualize it, understand it, go do it. I had another one who I'd had I could have conversation with, I could show him a drawing. They could go and do it, and then I had the third that I would have to talk to show a drawing, demonstrate how to do it, and then they'd be able to accomplish it. I think by having the podcast and your articles that you write, you're actually covering all three of those, which makes it virtually impossible for someone to fail.

Patrick: Yes. Well, we try to at least get them up the learning curve to a degree, right? There's always going to be things that arise that you can't anticipate. Construction is, there's so many things outside your control that you just have to

work with. I think a problem solvers are naturally attracted to trade work and to construction, because you like getting things done, you like solving problems that come up. You might find yourself waking up in the middle of the night with a solution to this thing that's been troubling your employees. That's satisfying. I think you'd agree.

Doug: Yes, absolutely. I used to tell my guys all the time, "The only thing that's going to be consistent in construction is inconsistency." [laughs]

Patrick: There's few things in our modern world that are a prototype every time. Even new homes that are the same in a subdivision have different finishes, or different fixtures, or they were built on a different day by different people and all that translates into having to deal with stuff as it comes up.

Doug: Yes, absolutely.

Katherine: Someone talk a little bit about trade media. Could you talk me through, explain why you feel working within trade media industry, would be a great career path for someone and getting connected to the trades, but also having a path and communication?

Patrick: Well, I think it's the perfect job for the right person. Someone who's interested in teaching, and who has an interest in working with their hands, I think is the perfect candidate for something like that. I am the first to admit that I was not a good writer when I started this work. I had some news writing classes in college, but I wrote in very staccato sentences, it was hard to read. I had to learn that and I was trained that. Once again, and I had some photography training, I had an interest in darkroom techniques. In college, once again, hands-on, I wanted to be printing my own photographs but I had to be trained to do the work I do for Taunton.

If you're willing to learn, and you have an interest in working with your hands, I would tell you to go for it and there's a lot of opportunity. I have little patience for folks who say, "I want to be an artist, I want to be a musician. I want to be a writer." Well, do those things. Start writing songs, start playing music, start writing articles, start taking pictures, start painting, whatever it is. If you're waiting for an invite from somebody, it's probably not going to happen. You have to be your own advocate and get where you want with your career.

Katherine: Yes, very true. Tell me a little bit about from your standpoint, how you see the trades? How they've evolved over the years, and where you see the future of the trades going.

Patrick: It's been sad to watch. My grandfather was a union plumber. My other grandfather was a chauffeur in a period where chauffeurs had to fix and work on cars probably daily because they were very unreliable and hard to operate. Those were respected jobs, but by the time I was in high school, it was seen as the track for the folks who were left behind academically. It's not to say they weren't smart, or there's no judgment there. It's just like, someone decided that they were not ready for college for whatever reason, and whether they had an interest or not, they were channeled into vo-technical programs, right?

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I had my guidance counselor, and my parents say to me, and I remember my good friend Andy Ingles saying the same thing. "You're too smart to be a carpenter, you're too smart to be an electrician." That makes me so sad. It made me sad at the time because the trades need really smart people. These are hard jobs that require training and problem-solving skills and what you need is to be smart.

Katherine: Yes. No, it's true, and we talk about this often that, how do we as a collective group continue to have this conversation to help push forward positive dialogue and views into really what the trades are. Just like you said, Doug will talk about it too, that he could probably read a tape measure better than anyone else can. Being in the trades or understanding math, you have to learn all these things to be successful.

Doug: Yes, absolutely. Patrick, I think he would agree I mean, work ethic is your biggest key. You have to show up, you have to be ready, you have to want to be successful but then after that, reading like just reading a print and understanding dimensions, people don't know how difficult that is but once you learn how to do it, how easy it is, and how much information there is, in those 57 pages of that print.

Katherine: Yes.

Patrick: There are skills that no one even talks about, like how to deal with clients, you are oftentimes the face of your company. How you handle yourself and how you deal with adversity has a huge effect on the success of your company. It might mean that this good client has a long-term relationship with your company, or they run the other way screaming for maybe good reason.

Katherine: I kind of end every single one of our podcasts with this. If you can give us your thoughts here, Patrick is, what do you see as your hopes and dreams and aspirations for the trades in general? What do you hope that you see in the future change or what they look like?

Patrick: That's a really good question. I would love to see tradespeople get as much respect from society, as doctors, lawyers, bankers, nurse, other professionals. The work is at least as tough and is at least as important. Shelter's a basic human need, why are investment bankers given all this social status? Of course, our retirement accounts are important, but boy, when your plumbing is broken, you tell me what you're worried about in that moment is your retirement account or your house flooding?

Katherine: Yes, we saw that during the pandemic and hopefully, I think that that really did open up a little bit more people's perspective.

Doug: Absolutely.

Patrick: I would love for us to respect folks and their decisions to want to do trade work. I know a lot of especially middle class parents are recoil at the thought of their kids wanting to work in trade work. I wish we could teach them how important it is. Honestly, how you can make a really good living now, especially hence help people

and enjoy your work. If you're going to be miserable every day of your life doing a job you don't want to do, why would you want someone to do that?

Doug: Absolutely. That's a recurring theme that we have here.

Katherine: It is, it is. I think a lot of it is that letting parents know, and letting counselors know and educating the student too that there's so many opportunities out there for them to have so they we need to continue to tell them the story.

[background music]

Katherine: Well, Patrick, thank you so much for your time today. It was so nice to meet you and get to know you a little bit more and learn a little bit more about fine homebuilding. We appreciate your time.

Patrick: It's been a pleasure talking to you both. Thank you so much.

Doug: You have a great day.

[outro music]

Katherine: Thank you have a good one. Thanks for joining us on this episode of *The Fix*. Be sure to follow us on your favorite podcast platform so you don't miss our next conversation dropping every Wednesday. If you have feedback about the show or a topic you'd like to see covered, send us an email at the fix@od.com or give us a shout out on social media. We would love to connect with you. Don't forget, you can get your daily fix by visiting od.com and we'll catch you next time.

[outro music]

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