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Authentic Collaborator

A Belfast-based builder with a penchant for fine design and meticulous craftsmanship

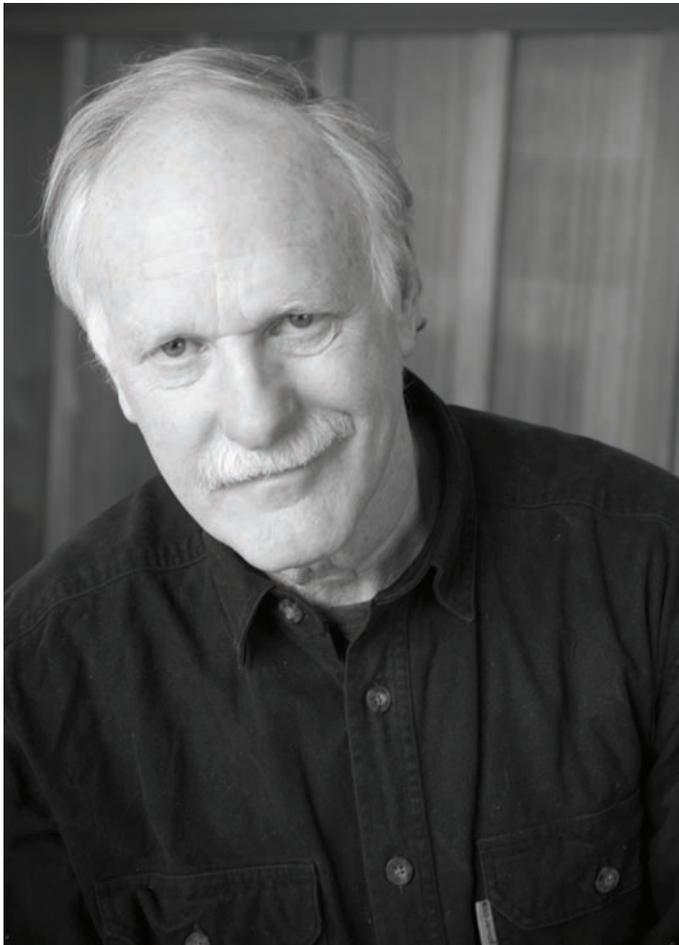
PROFILE Jay Fischer
by Joshua Bodwell
Photography Darren Setlow

Authentic. This is the word Jay Fischer uses to describe true Mainers, those unique yet familiar characters he has come to know over the three decades he has lived in the state. When Fischer, the founder and owner of Cold Mountain Builders in Belfast, uses the word, it is always accompanied by a smile. “Yeah, they’re the real deal,” he’ll say. “Authentic.”

It is high praise indeed from a modest man who is undoubtedly seen as an authentic character himself.

A native of Michigan, Fischer says he settled in Maine “quite accidentally” in the mid-1970s. On a whim, he joined several of his former classmates from Georgetown University, where he majored in history, who had moved to the Midcoast to work with John Cole. The cofounder of the progressive newspaper *Maine Times* and a tenacious conservationist, Cole was recruiting help to compile a study on Maine. The work—gathering statistics, town histories, and other data—took Fischer into the outer reaches of the state, and Maine simply crept into his bones. He soon found himself becoming part of the communities he was discovering—while still in his twenties, Fischer served as a selectman in Montville, where he was living at the time.

When Cole’s project had run its course, Fischer—who had little woodworking experience—signed on with a master builder in Alna, an authentic old-timer who taught him the tenets of traditional construction. “Learning to build was a way of being able to stay here,” Fischer says pragmatically. He learned the building trade quickly, and found that the most interesting and rewarding work available at the time was in restoration. While the majority of his early projects were homes and old barns, by the 1980s Fischer and his crew had taken part in larger reuse projects, including the revitalization of several post-Civil War brick buildings in downtown Belfast that had fallen into disrepair. The rehab work was right up Fischer’s alley. “Things were getting pretty derelict,” he says, “so it felt good to contribute to a positive change in town.”



During the same period, something of an artistic renaissance swept through Belfast. High-profile artists such as Alex Katz, Neil Welliver, and Yvonne Jacquette regularly showed in downtown gallery spaces that Cold Mountain had renovated. Fischer's passion for art—he is married to the accomplished painter Antonia Munroe—led him to an even larger renovation project in Rockland during the 1990s. Collaborating with Toshiko Mori—the Manhattan-based architect who also chairs the Department of Architecture at Harvard University Graduate School of Design—Fischer executed a major addition to the Farnsworth Art Museum, extending the building toward Rockland's now-vibrant main street. The Farnsworth is widely considered to be at the core of the town's rebirth.

Though impressive, these “commercial” projects were not what wholly made Cold Mountain's reputation; it was Fischer's attention to quality and detail in fine home construction. “A kind of sea change in home building hit the Midcoast in the late 1980s,” he says. “We were just in the right place and in a terrific position to handle the work.” Cold Mountain was already known for superior craftsmanship, and as the jobs rolled in Fischer's crew grew from 8 to 25, where it has remained. In 1990, Cold Mountain built a new workshop and office behind the very block of buildings they restored in

The diversity of work in Maine, says Fischer, has kept him continually inspired. While Fischer got his start with restoration work, exquisitely detailed custom homes dominate his time today. “FSC Certified Brazilian Cherry, known as Jatoba, was used in a veneer application at both the face inlay of the steel beams, the stair railings, and the stair treads,” explains Fischer of this Camden home (below). “The inlaid material at the fireplace is a native stone known as Norumbega—mined and finished in Rockport.”



“When you can combine basic, elemental materials like stone and wood and metal, and make it appear simple and seamless, it has an electrifying quality.”

PROFILE Jay Fischer

Fischer flips through artist Brice Marden's book of ink drawings, *Cold Mountain* (right). He took the name for his business not only because he spent his first Maine winter in a North-facing farm known locally as Cold Mountain, but also because the name reminded Fischer of Han-shan, the Tang Dynasty monk and poet of the Buddhist's Cold Mountain Temple, which he'd studied while at Georgetown University. "The millwork for the stair treads included a stable core of certified substrate, with a glue-up of solid Jatoba," says Fischer (below and lower right). "The stainless work was provided by Tri-Pyramid and the steel frame was fabricated by Rockport Steel." Like the old farms and barns Fischer once revitalized, this Camden home (designed by Elliott Elliott Norelius Architecture) has a quality of spare elegance and that is something Fischer relishes—even his office is Spartan: there is not computer on his austere desk, but for his guests there is a Stickley, American Craftsman style chair atop an Arts & Crafts style rug.



PROFILE Jay Fischer

Belfast. Fischer now has a full-time, in-house crew building custom cabinetry, casework, kitchens, and even furniture for Cold Mountain projects.

When it comes to his homes, Fischer eschews ostentation and excess in favor of traditional qualities: functional design, fine craftsmanship, appropriate scale, and superior materials. “When you can combine basic, elemental materials like stone and wood and metal, and make it appear simple and seamless, it has an electrifying quality,” Fischer says with a wide smile and obvious appreciation. “That sort of thing gets my blood boiling...in the right direction!”

But no matter how stunning the design or how fine the materials, a project is always measured by its craftsmanship and execution. Perhaps that is why some of the state’s premier architects—such as Bernhard & Priestley Architecture, Elliott Elliott Norelius Architecture, John Silverio, and Van Dam Architecture & Design, to name just a few—regularly rely on Cold Mountain Builders. “I have such respect for good design,” says Fischer, “and I’ve been lucky enough to work with people who in turn appreciate the expression of craftsmanship. There is a comfort level between us that makes it easy for me to assimilate their ideals.”

Because of the authentic relationships he has forged over the past three decades, Fischer defies classification as simply a “contractor” or a “builder.” Rather, he is an artist every bit as passionate as the talented architects he regularly works with. “I’m convinced that all of this positive collaboration accumulates within the project,” says Fischer, pausing for a moment before adding in a slightly hushed tone, “Not to be too precious, but I think that what you end up with after a true collaboration isn’t just a home—it’s an art piece.” **MH+D**



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