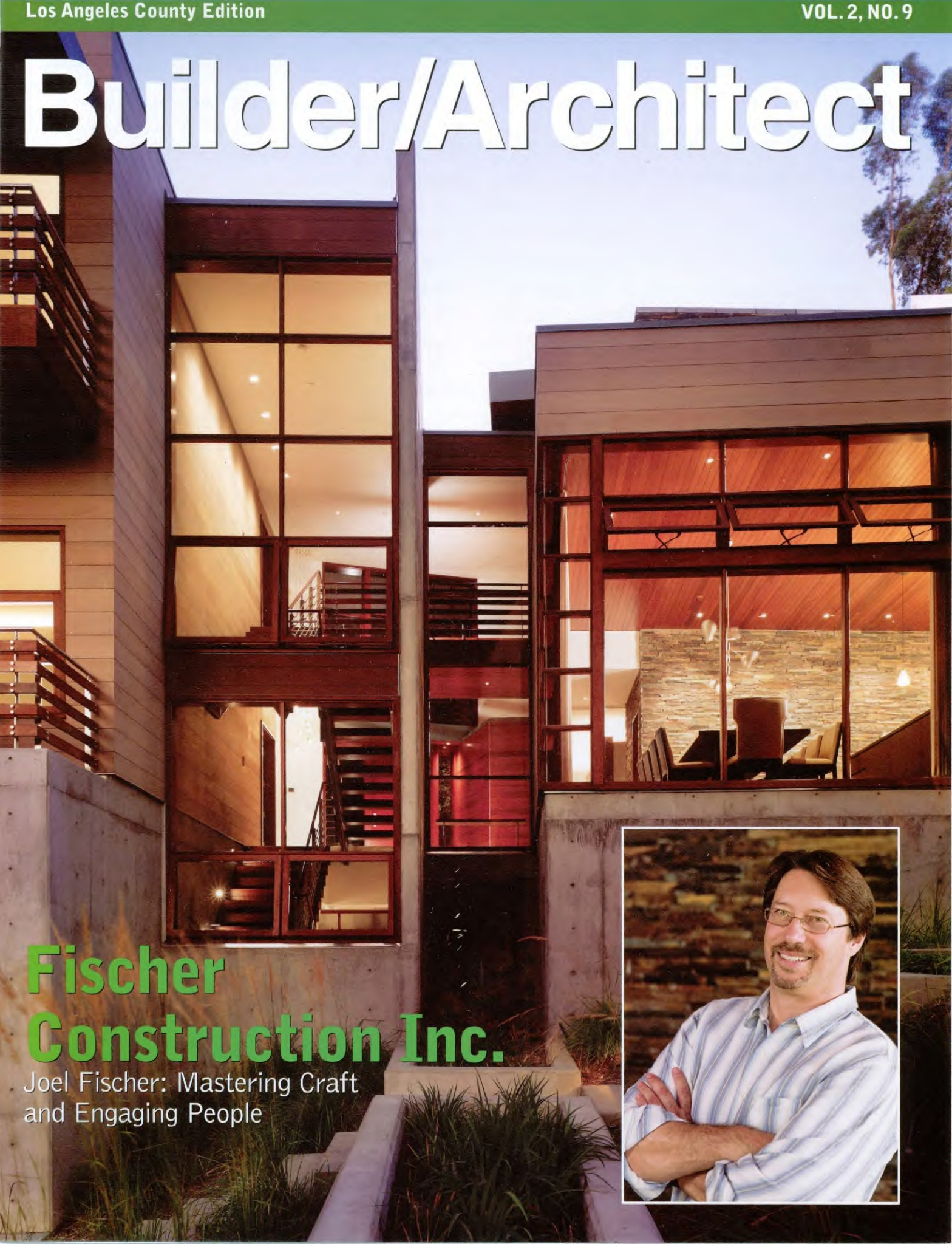


Builder/Architect



Fischer Construction Inc.

Joel Fischer: Mastering Craft
and Engaging People



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By Katherine Gould

Builder Joel Fischer was showing a prospective client through one of his completed houses. After standing in the house for a few moments, the client turned and asked, “I was just at another house that was very similar to this one. Why does yours feel like it was built so much better?”

Fischer, of course, knew exactly why and responded, “The care that my guys put in to make sure the floors are flat and level, the walls are straight and smooth, the miters tight and the paint lines perfect are all the things that most people wouldn’t individually notice, unless they were pointed out, but what they do notice is how solid our houses feel. It makes all the difference.”

That extra care goes into every project built by Fischer Construction Inc., whether it is the remodel of a 3,000-square-foot traditional family home or a one-of-a-kind, architecturally complex contemporary masterpiece. In modern, custom homes, there is the constant challenge of figuring out how to do something for the first time. Fischer has built a house with walls leaning out over a canyon and a pool cantilevered 28 feet above the ground and another with an inch reveal that formed a continuous line around the top and sides of every interior wall, door, window and cabinet (before prefabricated reveals were available to make that process easy).

Builder Joel Fischer of Fischer Construction Inc.





Architects — top left: David Kellen; middle left: David Kellen; bottom left: Marshall Lewis; top right: Tom Wilson; middle right: Ken Ungar; bottom right: Tichenor and Thorp





For a sleek, geometric house in Brentwood, constructed of concrete, glass and wood, Fischer built an 8-inch-wide concrete wall that stands 30 feet high and extends from interior to exterior with walls of windows on either side. The first challenge was getting the wall to be perfectly plumb, but then, when the wall was completed, Fischer's team had to find a way to hide the tips of the small steel rods in the holes left by the concrete snap ties, without taking away from the raw beauty of the wall. They decided to dab the steel tip inside each hole with caulk, smooth it by hand and then coat it with concrete dust. The result is a series of indentations that look like a natural product of the construction process but will protect the structure from water damage and lend a subtle layer of elegance and sophistication.

The other walls of the house were equally demanding, faced with horizontal strips of vertical-grain cedar siding. Fischer's team ran string lines to create a flat, square, plumb surface and individually shimmed each piece of framing until it provided a perfect base for the siding. The hard work paid off in sleek lines that run in elegant parallels around the house, meeting at smooth miters at each corner.

However, challenges come in all kinds. In the Brentwood house, Fischer was tasked with creating a baby gate at the top of the stairs. Of course, it couldn't be just any baby gate; it needed to blend in with the stainless-steel bars of the banister. One of Fischer's workers took on the challenge, creating a gate that locks

across the stairway, then folds out of the way, blending in seamlessly with the rest of the stair railing. “I was really proud of him for taking on that challenge and coming up with this design,” Fischer says.

Fischer affords every member of his team the opportunity to exercise their talents and stretch their abilities. Almost all of “his guys,” as he affectionately calls them, started working for him as general laborers. “Part of our culture is to identify the guys who have talent and give them the opportunity to grow,” Fischer says. To that end, he is always searching for those workers who embrace his motto of “more, better, faster.” “The mindset is, how can we do more of a task, do it better and do it faster,” Fischer says. “This doesn’t mean rushing, however. In my experience, if you plan ahead, you can do things quickly and efficiently, and your work comes out better, with far less effort than if you struggle and over-finesse it.”

Fischer has found that when he trains his crews to have that kind of mindset they get more done and are much less tired at the end of the day. Together, with

careful project planning, this strategy enables Fischer Construction to consistently produce the highest quality of craftsmanship within clients’ schedules and budgets. “For example, we completed a 2,000-square-foot house in eight weeks,” he says. “Five years later, we came back and added a second story in nine weeks — while the clients were living there.”

The workers who have embraced his style and grown under his tutelage have risen to the levels of master carpenter, team leader and even project manager. One has been with Fischer for 20 years, others for more than a decade. “I get as much joy out of seeing my guys succeed as I do out of the houses themselves,” says Fischer.

Personal satisfaction aside, Fischer’s overriding mission is to make the construction process a pleasurable one for clients and their architects. He sees his job as bringing to life an architect’s vision and a client’s dream. He takes pride in knowing that his team can build anything an architect specifies, while still being easy to work with and efficient while doing it.





Architect: Rockefeller Partners

To make sure his clients are happy, Fischer constantly asks his team a question that has guided him throughout his career: How would I do this if it was my house? He understands that even when the house is a work of art in and of itself, it is a home, so he tries to make the process as trouble-free as possible. As a result, he retains genuine friendships with most of his clients, some of whom continue to thank him years, even decades, later.

One of the little touches that sets Fischer apart is his desire to, whenever possible, put the children's handprints in cement on the property. That desire to include the children comes in part from his childhood. His father served in the Air Force, so Fischer was born in France and lived in the Philippines, New Mexico, Florida and Washington, DC. When his father retired in 1971, the family settled in Southern California. Fischer's father came up with a unique way to ease the transitions. "Every time we moved, we took all the boxes and built something in the front yard," he says. "All the other kids in the neighborhood would come

over to see what we'd built and to play, and that's how we introduced ourselves."

Fischer is now married with three kids of his own, but his childhood has left him with a personality perfectly suited for a contractor: a love of building, a comfort with moving from one job to another and a constant desire to forge new friendships. He also retains an infectious youthful enthusiasm, and he makes sure that everyone on his team gets a chance to share his feelings of accomplishment and pride. He regularly asks his workers to take a break and just look at what they've built. It jolts them out of the routine of working for a paycheck and helps them see houses the way he sees them — as beautiful, livable works of art. ■

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