

Introduction



I can't imagine building furniture without handplanes any more than I can imagine building furniture without wood.

Planes touch almost every surface of my projects. They flatten panels and prepare them for finish. They define and refine my joinery so it's tight. They add the mouldings, beads and chamfers that differentiate my work from a shipping crate.

Most power-tool woodworkers assume that I do all this because of some political choice. That I have an affection for the pre-Industrial age. That I live off the grid with goats, granola and two grimy children.

Nothing could be further from reality. I own a full suite of machinery in my shop for the brutal processing of rough timber. Instead, the reason I use handplanes is that I believe they are the most highly evolved wood-cutting system ever developed. And that basic handplane technology has yet to be eclipsed by anything with an electric cord.

And in many cases, handplanes are faster than the equivalent power-tool. I know this sounds absurd. Bear with me.

Sure, a router can cut 200 feet of moulding in a couple minutes. But consider this: How often does a garage furniture-maker need to cut 200 feet of anything? And how does a router-cut surface compare to one cut with a moulding plane? It doesn't. Router-cut surfaces require sanding. And the more complex the profile, the more grueling the sanding. Hand-cut mouldings are ready to finish right from the tool.

What about dealing with flat surfaces? In my years of sanding and planing, I have found that dressing my stock with sandpaper is slower than doing it with a plane. Good sanding requires careful attention to detail as you progress through the grits. With a plane you can make two swipes and be done.

To be certain, industrial machines like wide-belt sanders can leave planes in the dust, but these are out of reach for most home woodworkers.

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS

Because you're holding this book, I suspect some of these ideas have crossed your mind. And by now you're probably wondering: What's the catch?

The catch is that you have to learn some skills to become good with handplanes. It won't take you

years or even months. But it will take time, effort and risk. You see, the difference between handplanes and power tools isn't the electricity. It's the engineering.

Power tools have brilliantly eliminated the need for the first-time user to be highly skilled to do basic operations. Even beginning woodworkers can turn out stunning feats of woodworking thanks to the cleverness of the tools themselves.

I'm not saying that power-tool users are unskilled. In experienced hands, power tools can do amazing things. The difference is among the beginners. It takes a lot longer to learn to make mouldings with a plane than it does with a router.

So where do you begin? To use handplanes, you need to learn to sharpen. It's the gateway skill to everything else. This book includes the essentials for getting you started, but nothing beats hands-on teaching. Find a weekend sharpening class in your town if you can.

After you learn to sharpen, the puzzle pieces will fall into place. Mastering one tool (such as a block plane) will get you halfway to taming the bench planes. Understanding the bench plane system will prepare you for the joinery planes. And mastering the odd cutters and grips of the joinery planes will pave the road to mastering the moulding planes.

And here's the final note: The learning process with these tools never ends. I picked up my first block plane when I was about 11 or 12 and raised a panel in my dad's garage shop. I've used handplanes to build almost every project I've completed since graduating college. And I am still learning.

This book is a compilation of a lot of the things I've written about handplanes during the last 10 years, but it is incomplete. Though I cover the bench planes and joinery planes fairly well, the section on moulding planes is inadequate – I'm still not good enough with these tools to teach others to use them.

This is supposed to be heartening – not discouraging. Even the best plane users are still learning something new with every stroke. And the universe of these tools is rich and deep – enough for a lifetime. So before I waste any more of yours, let's get started.

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