

THE MISSING BUILDER CLASS

The People Who Built Canada - and Why We Stopped Producing Them

A Paper on Craft Knowledge, Trades Formation,
and the Workforce Canada Stopped Producing

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Part I — The Class Itself

There was a generation of Canadians who built things for a living. Not managed them. Not consulted on them. Not prepared reports about them. Built them — with tools, with their hands, with knowledge accumulated across years of standing in unfinished structures in the cold, learning what worked and what failed, and why the difference mattered.

Call them the builder class. They were tradespeople and foremen, site superintendents and small contractors, builder-owners who ran crews of five to twenty and knew every trade they managed because they had worked most of them. They were carpenters who could read a rafter table in their head, plasterers who could run a cornice profile in wet lime without a template, bricklayers who understood the difference between a wall that would stand for a century and one that looked like it would. They were not a demographic accident. They were the product of a system that took the transmission of practical knowledge seriously — and treated the people who held that knowledge accordingly.

The postwar decades were their formation period. A country that needed to house returning veterans, build its cities, and extend itself across a demanding geography required people who could actually execute. Vocational training in secondary schools was not a consolation prize — it was a structured pathway into a recognized trade, with apprenticeship programs that linked formal instruction to time on the tools under someone who already knew what they were doing. The Red Seal certification, introduced in 1952, established national standards that gave the credential weight across provinces. The system was not perfect. But it produced people, in volume, who could build.

That system is now substantially gone. What replaced it is the subject of this paper.

“May have been the losing side. Still not convinced it was the wrong one.”

— Malcolm Reynolds, *Firefly*, “Serenity” (pilot)

Part II — Two Kinds of Loss

The trades shortage is discussed today primarily as a volume problem. There are not enough electricians, plumbers, carpenters, ironworkers, heavy equipment operators. The numbers are real and the consequences are material: projects delayed, costs inflated, housing targets that exist on paper and nowhere else.

But there are two distinct kinds of trades loss, and they do not respond to the same remedies. Conflating them produces the wrong diagnosis.

Volume losses

In British Columbia, 72 percent of contractors report a shortage of skilled trades, forcing them to turn down projects and absorb rising costs.¹ Nationally, the construction sector’s job vacancy rate sat at 4.2 percent in early 2024 — well above the national average. BuildForce Canada’s projections for 2025 to 2034 are unambiguous: more than 270,000 construction workers will retire in that period, roughly 20 percent of the 2024 labour force. When retirement replacement is combined with new housing demand and announced infrastructure commitments, gross recruiting requirements over the decade could rise above 520,000 workers.²

These losses are severe. They are also, in principle, recoverable. Train more people. Rebuild the pipeline. Fix the credential recognition system for internationally trained tradespeople. The path exists, even if the political will to walk it has been inconsistent.

Craft losses

The second category does not respond to a training pipeline, because what was lost was not volume. It was knowledge — embodied, tacit, transmitted person to person across years of shared work — and that transmission has been severed.

Ornamental plaster. Fine millwork. Hand-cut roof framing. Decorative brickwork executed in actual masonry rather than applied veneer. These trades are not merely understaffed. They are approaching extinction as living practices, and the distinction matters. A written manual can describe how lime plaster behaves as it sets. It cannot transmit the sensory calibration of a plasterer's hand — the pressure, the angle, the reading of the wall — that takes years to develop and can only be learned alongside someone who already has it.

Once the last practitioner retires without a successor, the knowledge does not go dormant. It disappears. The break in generational continuity is irreversible in a way that a staffing shortage is not.³

Part III — A Short Catalogue of What Is Already Gone

The following is not a comprehensive inventory. It is a representative account of trades that either no longer exist at meaningful scale in Canada or survive only in the hands of a small number of aging practitioners with no succession.

Ornamental Plaster

From the mid-eighteenth century through the Depression years of the 1930s, ornamental plaster was a central craft of the built environment. The studios that produced it were ecosystems of layered specialization: draftsmen who interpreted architectural details, sculptors who worked in clay, mould-makers, casters, and finishers who cleaned the production units before installation.⁴ The plasterwork in a pre-war bank, courthouse, or railway station was not decoration applied to a building. It was structural expression — the building asserting its own permanence.

That permanence now requires maintenance that almost no one can provide. Sourcing a plasterer who can repair an original ornamental ceiling — not replicate it with fibreglass castings, but work with lime in the original medium, matching the profile and finish of what was already there — is a task that has become, in most Canadian cities, effectively impossible. The fibreglass alternative is not wrong. It simply is not the same material, does not age the same way, and in a building old enough to have the original work, eventually announces itself as a substitution.

Fine Millwork

There was a period in Canadian residential and commercial construction when the trim carpenter was not an installer but a craftsperson. Profiles were designed with an understanding of how wood moves across seasons. Joints were cut to accommodate that movement rather than resist it. The relationship between a piece of moulding and the wall it met was considered — the reveal, the shadow line, the way light fell across a well-made casing.

Contemporary millwork is produced by router tables and CNC machines to specifications that optimize for cost and speed. The output is consistent, predictable, and dimensionally stable in the short term. What it lacks is the judgment that a craftsperson brought to each specific situation — reading the grain, understanding the species, knowing how the piece would behave in the building it was entering. The knowledge is not transferable to a machine. It lived in people, and those people are largely gone.

Hand-Cut Roof Framing

The shift from hand-cut rafters to engineered trusses is, in most applications, rational. Trusses are faster to install, dimensionally consistent, and structurally predictable. They have made residential construction more efficient at scale, and that efficiency has real value.

What the shift also produced is a generation of framers who cannot read a rafter table. The spatial reasoning required to frame a complex roof — to work through the geometry of intersecting hips, irregular valleys, compound angles, a dormer that does not align with the ridge — was once a standard competency. It is now rare enough to be remarkable. The knowledge has not entirely disappeared, but the practitioners who hold it are retiring, they are not training successors at any meaningful scale, and the economic incentives for a young framer to develop those skills have largely evaporated.

The consequence is invisible until it isn't. Most buildings do not require a hand-cut roof. The ones that do — the heritage restoration, the complex addition, the structure where a truss simply cannot be engineered to fit — increasingly cannot find someone to frame them correctly.

Brick and Masonry Craft

Walk through a neighbourhood built before 1960. Look at the brickwork. Then walk through one built last year.

The comparison does not require annotation. Corbelling, soldier courses, decorative bonding patterns, arched lintels carried in actual masonry — these were not ornamental choices applied after the structural decisions were made. They were the structural decisions, and they required a mason who understood both the engineering and the expression simultaneously. Contemporary veneer brick, applied to a structure that is doing its work in steel and concrete, is a different thing entirely. It may be indistinguishable at a glance. It is not the same craft, and it does not produce the same building. Even with a brick veneer, you walk through many modern subdivisions and look at the details and you will see misaligned joints, poor tooling of mortar, colour variations and mortar smeared on the brick faces. Whether due to schedule pressure, labour shortages, or changing training pathways, the level of craftsmanship visible in many projects today often differs markedly from that seen a generation ago.

Still Needed. Still Rare.

It would be a mistake to read the preceding catalogue as a list of things that no longer matter because technology replaced them. That is not what happened, and it is not the condition we are in. The trades described above are not diminished because the work they served disappeared. They are diminished because the people who could do them were not replaced.

The detail trim at a stair newel, a casing return at a corner, the finished reveal on a custom cabinet — these are not architectural curiosities. They are part of the daily production of residential and commercial construction, and they require hands that have done them before. Drywall finishing in a tight mechanical room, an awkward soffit angle, a corner where automated tools cannot reach — the solution is not a better machine. It is a finisher who has developed the sensory judgment to work in three dimensions under constraint, who understands how a compound curve behaves before the mud sets. Even the engineered truss — the rationalized, manufactured, optimized product of a century of structural development — typically requires hand-cutting at its bearing points, at valleys, at porch roofs and dormers where the geometry does not resolve cleanly into a factory specification. The installer who cannot also cut has reached the limit of their usefulness precisely where the building needs them most.

Custom brick detailing at a column base or an entrance surround. A stone threshold scribed to an irregular floor. A railing profile worked by hand because the profile mill does not produce that

radius. These situations arise on ordinary projects, not only heritage restorations. They arise routinely, and the industry's capacity to meet them with competence rather than workarounds has been quietly eroding for two decades.

The distinction being drawn here is between an operator and a craftsperson. An operator runs a process. A craftsperson understands what the process is trying to accomplish and can continue the work when the process runs out. The trades were always built on craftspeople — men and women whose competence was the product of aptitude, yes, but more fundamentally of time: time spent watching someone who already knew, time spent making mistakes under supervision, time spent developing the physical and spatial intelligence that accrues only through repetition on real work. That formation cannot be compressed into a course. It requires a person, experienced and willing, to stand beside a less experienced one and say: not like that. Like this.

Automation and artificial intelligence are transforming what the construction industry can produce without craft judgment — and also revealing more precisely where craft judgment is irreplaceable. CNC routers have made certain millwork profiles available that no hand could produce economically at scale. Robotics are entering repetitive masonry and concrete applications. Some argue that the advance of technology makes the loss of craft knowledge less consequential over time.

This just isn't true. Every automated system has a boundary condition — a geometry it cannot resolve, a material it cannot read, a constraint the specification did not anticipate. The higher the automation baseline, the more visible and consequential that boundary becomes, and the rarer the craftsperson who can operate beyond it. The construction industry is not moving toward a future in which human craft judgment becomes unnecessary. It is moving toward one in which that judgment is needed less frequently, required on shorter notice, and available from fewer people. That is not a mitigation of the problem. It is a different and in some respects more acute version of it.

Part IV — The Decisions That Produced This

The loss of the builder class was not an accident of history. It was the aggregate result of a sequence of decisions, made over several decades, by governments, school boards, cultural institutions, and an economy that decided, collectively, what kinds of knowledge were worth transmitting and what kinds were not.

Secondary school vocational programming was systematically dismantled through the 1980s and 1990s. The policy rationale was not explicitly hostile to trades — it was expressed as an expansion of opportunity, a commitment to ensuring that every student could access post-secondary education. What it communicated, in practice, was that university was success and trades were what you did if university was not available to you. That signal, sent consistently over thirty years, shaped the decisions of parents, students, and guidance counsellors in ways that policy instruments have since struggled to reverse.

Apprenticeship completion rates fell as the economic and institutional infrastructure that supported them was gradually withdrawn. Employers who had once taken on apprentices as a cost of being in the industry found the economics increasingly unfavourable. Apprentices cost time and margin in the short term; the long-term benefit of having trained your own workforce was a consideration that short-horizon business planning tends to discount.

The Red Seal program has not been abolished. It operates today — but the credential it certifies is constrained by the apprenticeship pipeline that feeds it, and that pipeline has been progressively narrowed. National completion rates for apprenticeship programs have not reliably exceeded 50 percent across major trades for years. The standard did not disappear. The pathway to earning it did, which amounts to the same thing in practice.

The small contractor was the primary vehicle through which trades knowledge had been transmitted. The builder-owner running a crew of ten did not think of mentorship as a programme — it was simply how work got done. The apprentice watched, was corrected, was given more responsibility as they proved ready for it. The learning was embedded in the production. As regulation, liability requirements, insurance costs, and compressed margins made the small contractor increasingly unviable, that transmission mechanism went with it. The large firms that absorbed market share were more efficient in many respects. They were not better at producing the next generation of tradespeople.

Immigration policy made a belated correction. For two decades, Canada's points-based selection system effectively prioritized credential classes — engineers, accountants, information technology workers — over trade classes. The correction, when it came, was real: targeted category-based draws for trades workers, accelerated credential recognition programs, dedicated funding for foreign credential recognition in residential construction.⁵ But the correction arrived after the shortage had already become acute, and it was sized as a supplement to a domestic pipeline rather than as a replacement for one.

The numbers reveal the scale problem. Budget 2024's foreign credential recognition investment supported credential recognition for roughly 1,500 construction workers in the first announced tranche.⁵ Against a projected shortfall of more than 520,000 workers over the decade,² that is not rounding error — it is a different order of magnitude entirely. A pipeline that had not been maintained for thirty years cannot be restored by adjusting the immigration mix. And as the next section shows, that pool is shrinking while the competition for it grows.

Less examined is the damage the most recent boom did to the formation pipeline itself. The years from roughly 2015 through 2022 produced demand for construction labour that the existing qualified workforce could not satisfy. The consequence was not simply that projects ran short-handed — it was that underskilled workers were absorbed into roles their formation had not prepared them for, because leaving work unfilled was the only alternative.

The same dynamic operated at the contractor level. Entry barriers that had historically served as informal quality filters — years on tools before running a crew, a track record that more experienced competitors could verify — compressed or disappeared entirely. Individuals with limited experience founded businesses, secured contracts, and accumulated project histories that, on paper, were indistinguishable from the records of operators with genuine depth. Some of those firms grew into capable operations. Others failed. What neither produced, in meaningful numbers, was the formation environment that turns an underskilled worker into a skilled one.

The boom did not cause the shortage. But it accelerated one of its least-discussed consequences: a generation of workers whose credentials outpaced their competence, in a market too busy to notice the difference.

Part V — Musical Chairs At A Global Scale

Canada's response to the shortage it helped create was predictable: recruit from abroad. If the domestic training pipeline was not producing enough tradespeople, find tradespeople who had been produced elsewhere and bring them here. The logic is sound as far as it goes.

It does not go as far as it appears.

Germany currently has approximately 628,000 unfilled positions, with particularly acute gaps in skilled trades, construction, and healthcare.⁶ Across Europe, the European Labour Authority identifies construction and engineering trades on shortage lists in the majority of reporting

countries — welders, electricians, and craft and related trades workers appearing among the most widespread shortfalls.⁷ The United Kingdom, France, Ireland, and Portugal are all reporting that the majority of employers cannot find skilled workers for open positions.

The developed world, broadly, made approximately the same policy decisions at approximately the same time. University over trades. Knowledge economy over physical economy. The credential over the competency. And now the developed world is simultaneously competing for the same diminishing pool of trained tradespeople — many of them from countries that retained their vocational systems and are now watching those workers be recruited away.

Canada has both recruited from that pool and contributed to it. Tradespeople who came to Canada from Europe and elsewhere, integrated into Canadian worksites and communities, are now receiving recruitment interest from the same countries they left — because those countries face shortages of their own and have noticed that Canada trained their workers for them, on Canadian worksites, for several years. The pool is not growing. The competition for it is.

This framing resolves the volume problem with clarity. But the craft loss problem operates on a different timeline and resists the same international remedy. Germany does not have an export surplus of ornamental plasterers, fine millwork carpenters, or masons trained in decorative bonding. The trades approaching extinction in Canada are approaching extinction across most of the developed world simultaneously. The countries that have best retained those practices — Japan's Living National Treasures designation, Germany's *meister* system, the guild structures that persist across Northern Europe — did so by treating craft transmission as a deliberate policy priority rather than a market outcome. There is no international labour pool from which to source what was never mass-produced and is not currently being preserved. The craft extinction problem was local in its cause and will have to be local in its resolution.

The developed world is now competing, simultaneously, for a workforce it collectively decided not to produce.

Part VI — The Collective Action Problem

The institutional failures documented in this paper have a structural characteristic that matters for thinking about solutions. Knowledge hoarding on a worksite is not irrational self-interest. It is a rational response to an environment in which skills are scarce, their scarcity provides economic security, and there is no visible mechanism ensuring that teaching someone else does not diminish your own position. The experienced finisher who withholds technique, the superintendent who keeps the schedule in their head, the framer who never writes down how they solved the hip — each is making a locally defensible calculation that produces a collectively catastrophic outcome. The knowledge retires with them. The work still needs to be done.

This is the definition of a collective action problem. And collective action problems are not solved by moral exhortation alone. They are solved by changing the incentive structure — which is precisely what policy instruments are designed to do.

The correctives are not theoretical. Apprenticeship tax credits that materially improve the economics of training relative to simply hiring a journeyperson. Liability reform that reduces the cost to a small contractor of having a trainee on site. Graduated certification structures that give a developing tradesperson a recognized credential at each stage of competence, reducing the incentive to jump to a journeyperson wage before training is complete. These are not difficult to design. Several provinces have implemented versions of them. The political difficulty is sustaining them long enough to produce results — a three-to-five-year apprenticeship cycle

means that any policy cancelled before it matures produces no measurable output, gets evaluated on its costs, and confirms the sceptic's view that trades investment doesn't work.

The craft extinction track requires a different instrument: explicit public investment in master-to-apprentice transmission for trades approaching irreversibility. Japan's designation of Living National Treasures (Ningen Kokuhō) for bearers of irreplaceable craft knowledge is not nostalgia policy. It is infrastructure policy, applied to a category of knowledge that cannot be recovered once it is gone and that has direct application in the maintenance, restoration, and enrichment of a built environment that will outlast the people who built it.⁸ Canada has no equivalent. The argument for one is not sentimental. It is the straightforward observation that some things cannot be bought back once they are gone, and that the window in which prevention is still possible is measurably closing.

The institutional failures cannot be undone at the site level — but the transmission of knowledge can only ever happen at the site level. It has never happened anywhere else. If you have the skill, teach it because the knowledge has no other way forward. Policy can change the incentives. It cannot do the actual teaching. That has always been a human act, one person standing beside another and saying: not like that. Like this.

Part VII — What the Buildings Will Tell Us

The builder class was not a golden age. It was a workforce — trained, skilled, and replenished because the people in it understood that their knowledge had to travel further than their own career to mean anything. The buildings they left behind are not a monument to a lost era. They are an ongoing maintenance liability, a heritage designation program stretched across every pre-1970 commercial and institutional building in the country, and a test of whether anyone can still do the work those buildings require.

The answer, increasingly, is: fewer people than the buildings need.

What this generation faces is not a mystery. A housing crisis that has made affordability an acute political problem. An infrastructure deficit accumulated over thirty years of deferred maintenance. An aging building stock — schools, hospitals, courthouses, transit systems — that the postwar builder class constructed and that is now reaching the end of its first service life simultaneously. All of it requiring hands that know what they are doing, at a moment when those hands are in shorter supply than at any point since the war those veterans came home from.

The challenge is structural, but it is not unprecedented. Canada rebuilt its skilled workforce before — in conditions of greater urgency, with fewer available tools, starting from further behind. The postwar decade that produced the builder class this paper has been mourning began with a housing crisis and a labour market that had been interrupted by five years of war. The system that emerged from that moment was not inevitable. It was built, deliberately, by people who decided it should exist.

The tradesperson and the engineer are not in a hierarchy. They are in a partnership, and one half of that partnership has been systematically undervalued for long enough that the shortage is no longer a forecast — it is the present condition. The young person choosing the trades today is not settling. They are entering the most consequential construction generation this country has seen since those veterans came home, with the strongest labour market in the history of the sector and the full weight of thirty years of deferred investment waiting for them to address it.

There is no structural reason that cannot be met. There is only the question of whether the decision gets made — and by whom, and how soon.

Also in the Building Forward Series: How Do We Get Innovative...Again? (Paper One) examines how institutional inertia and the conflation of familiarity with effectiveness are quietly suppressing innovation across construction, housing, and the Canadian economy. Ontario's Housing Giants (Paper Two) profiles the developers and rental builders who shaped the modern Canadian housing landscape — and what their concentration of market power means for everyone building after them. The Cathedral and the Condo (Paper Three) explores the tension between long-horizon thinking and short-cycle development — and what Canada builds when it stops being able to tell the difference.

This paper was developed with the assistance of generative AI tools — Claude (Anthropic) and ChatGPT (OpenAI) — for source organization, structural review, and drafting refinement. AI is a tool. Like any tool, its value is determined by the judgment of the person using it. The pneumatic nail gun was resisted by carpenters who believed it would undermine craftsmanship. AutoCAD was resisted by drafters who believed hand drawing produced better design thinking. In both cases, the tool expanded what skilled practitioners could accomplish — it did not replace the judgment that made the work worth doing. The analysis, policy positions, and conclusions in this paper are the author's own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Norris is a Canadian construction and capital planning professional with experience in large-scale residential development and infrastructure-related projects. This paper is an independent thought piece and does not reflect the views of any employer or affiliated organization.

ENDNOTES

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