



A Day with Silva

Attendees lined up to meet Silva and ask questions while he took a “break.” He greeted each person, signed autographs and answered every question.

Home renovation shows were once few, far and between. But these days you can cut the television on at all hours of the day or night and find one. Even with the latest home-makeover boom, the building industry isn't one of great fame. There are few Elvis figures in this business, but, inarguably, Tom Silva is one of them.

SHELTER had the pleasure of meeting Silva as he visited a home and garden show in Washington, D.C. What began as a simple ride-along from airport to show turned into “A Day with Tom Silva.”

You have to wonder, with the magic of television, whether someone like Silva is a real, tool-toting contractor, or whether he just “plays one.” Allow me to answer this question: Tom Silva is the real deal. He doesn't just play the role of a contractor on television, he is a contractor.

As we waited at an arrival gate in Reagan

International Airport, like two teenagers about to meet the latest pop craze, Mike Levy and I discussed what he might be like in person. Mike is the husband of SHELTER's owner and company president, Deb Levy, and an avid *This Old House* fan. I was dwarfed when Deb told me he had watched a dozen or so past episodes to get warmed up for the event.

We decided to forego an arrival sign reading, “Tom Silva,” lest we be crushed to death by do-it-yourselfers waiting for their Elvis. My mind churned through the possibilities—everything from pompous, to down-to-earth; finely dressed, freshly powdered and escorted, to jeans, sneakers and all alone. The latter seemed improbable for a man as renowned as Silva, but it was exactly right. Silva walked out of the arrival gate—alone at that—wearing a pair of blue jeans, a denim shirt and comfortable slip on shoes.

Before we had a chance to fumble into what



by Drew Vass,

assistant editor of
SHELTER magazine.

a pleasure it was to meet him, Silva opened with, “Hey guys. What’s up? Gosh, the weather sure is great here isn’t it?” There was our answer—he was completely down-to-earth. When I shook his hand, his calluses devoured mine. This guy swings a hammer.

I fully expected a crowd to gather for autographs and questions as we made our way from the terminal to the car, but surprisingly that didn’t happen. It was difficult holding back for just that short amount of time, but, I assure you, when the car door shut, he barely had time to get his seat adjusted before the questions began.

I figured I would break the ice with the topic du jour. The current *This Old House* magazine issue, which I had tucked into my bag for a timely autograph request, and the latest television episode featured an Austin, Texas, project that was “going green,” so I asked him what he thought of the green movement and if he felt it would eventually fade.

“I hope not,” he said in a sincere tone.

“It’s been around forever,” he assured. Only a figure like Silva can make a statement like that. “When I was a kid and worked for my dad, we reused and recycled a lot of stuff. And now, with the engineered material, we’re really making some progress in saving the trees and forests,” he said then added, “And all the new adhesives are better for the environment.”

I thought I was ahead of the game, taking my first construction job at 13, but Silva got his start as a child. He grew up in Lexington, Mass., and his first major project involved adding a basement ... to an already-completed house. I mentioned the project and added a dash of honesty by saying, “With all-due-respect, Mr. Silva ...”

“Please, call me Tom,” he interjected.

“With all-due-respect, Tom, if that was my first project, I think it would have left me saying, ‘I’ve got to find something else to do with my life.’”

He laughed good and hard, then said, “Yeah, no kidding.”

“We spent two-and-a-half years digging a hole under that house,” he explained in a slow, sentimental tone.

I started reminiscing about one of my least favorite projects of all time—digging a 12- by 24-inch trench around the inside perimeter of a nearly 5,000 square-foot foundation. The crawl-space was, maybe, two feet in height and

the project involved cutting a shovel handle off so I could dig lying on my side; then I had to cart in buckets of gravel one-by-one to backfill the perimeter.

Luckily, before I had a chance to mention my meager efforts, Silva trumped me. “Did they tell you how big that hole was?” he asked, referring to the biographical information posted on the show’s website. “It was 14 feet deep, 20 feet wide and about 40 feet long,” he explained. “We mixed all the concrete by hand.”

Ouch.

“When my mother suddenly announced that she wanted to move,” he explained, “I said, ‘You can’t do that!’”

The house was his childhood home, a 1787 Colonial, and that project was all it took to hook him. Silva said the sense of accomplishment he gathered from the experience proved to him this was what he wanted to do the rest of his life—not dig holes, but build things. He didn’t fall far from the tree, though, because Silva’s father was also a contractor. In fact, it was his father who was approached about doing the television show.

Silva said he was working with his father when the show’s producer approached them about participation. His father refused. Apparently the family business was in high demand. Silva said his father’s reply was simply, “Too busy. What would I want to do that for? We have more business than we know what to do with.”

The producer persisted, but Silva’s father did not waiver. Finally, on the third try, his father gave in and the rest was history.

“Yeah, I like to tell people, if my father had said yes the first time? I would have been Norm Abrams,” Silva joked.

His Old House

I mentioned a rain-water collection system used in the show’s Austin project.

“I’m actually getting ready to do one of those in my house,” he explained. My ears perked up, as I was dying to know more about this master’s abode.

“Yeah, the water is unbelievably expensive, so why not?” he suggested. “I’ve had the tanks for four-and-a-half years, so I’ve got to get to it sometime. You can’t rush these things,” he added while chuckling.

I capitalized on the opportunity to pry a bit.

"So is your house an ongoing project?" I asked.

"No, my house is in pretty good shape," he said, much to my surprise. But then he added, "I mean, I've renovated it three times and even cut it in half once, though."

We discussed how, exactly, one goes about cutting a house in half. Silva's understanding of framing carpentry was astonishing. An explanation of the bisection led to an overview of the framing style used to construct homes of that time period, which led to an overview of the evolution of house framing.

We discussed the commonly held belief that older homes are well built in comparison to newer ones.

"Most of your projects seem to be older—1700s or 1800s homes—and most of these new houses are built from materials predominantly made from resins, wood flours and chips," I commented. "It's almost like we're building houses that are designed to be recycled. Would you agree?" I probed.

"Oh definitely," he agreed.

"I'm looking at an imitation-slate shingle right now that's new and it's designed to be recyclable," he explained. "They're actually making it out of materials that they know can be recycled easily in the future; so when it's time to rip that roof off, in 50 years, there's a purpose for it. It can be reused—ground up and repurposed, but it's not something that you have to worry about as a hazardous material going into a landfill that we can't do anything with," he said.

Silva's tone was one of concern at this point. His Boston accent fired up as he grew more passionate about the subject of waste and hazardous materials.

"All these asbestos products, from years ago that are now in landfills, they're marked with where they came from. You own it for life," he explained. "If it comes out of your house into that landfill, it's marked with your name on it."

"I think the problem with that is, it scares people and they think, 'Well, if you're going to do that, then I'm going to try and sneak it behind your back and get rid of it my own way,'" he said.

Silva thinks the more you hassle people, the less cooperative and helpful they're likely to be. He said it's difficult for everyday people to understand the importance of programs and guidelines meant to safeguard the building

industry.

"It's like these building officials, when you go to get building permits; sometimes they make it so hard on you that people just don't want the hassle, but people don't realize it's for their own protection—to do it right," he explained. "And they figure 'Well, this guy isn't going to tell me what to do,' but if they sit down, and they're nice about it, and let [the official] walk them through their issues and problems, it's amazing how much smoother things work."

I decided to make a bold move.

"Yeah, I'm man enough to admit that I once bypassed a building permit on some electrical work—just some little something—but I did lose a little sleep over it in the end," I told him in a not-so-proud tone, then added, "I thought, 'Man, if my house burns down, I deserve it.'"

Silva (rightfully) showed no mercy.

"That's right. And you own that mistake," he said. "You did it."

Following a very brief but awkward moment of silence, that was well-deserved, I attempted to transition the subject by explaining that I simply didn't do electrical work.

He returned to his usual cheerful tone immediately.

"That's one of the things that we don't focus too much on for our show," he explained. "We tell you a little bit about it, but we always show you the professional doing it, because that's one of the issues that a homeowner can really pay dearly for if they screw it up," he explained. After more than 20 years on *This Old House*, Silva knows the show's influence on do-it-yourselfers.

"So we try not to emphasize the idea that a homeowner should be doing their own wiring. I mean, if you're doing basic wiring, like changing a fan and stuff like that, maybe. But wiring an addition or a house? It can be tricky," he said.

Don't Make 'Em Like They Used To

"I know you're the general contractor for the show, which covers all areas of construction, but, do you have one thing you favor?" I asked.

"I like restoration and renovation—bringing back these old buildings. There's such warmth to those spaces and designs," he said. "I like being true to the element—true to that environment. I don't like it when someone takes



Silva even answered questions over his shoulder, while setting up for a presentation.

an old house and puts the wrong period in it.”

This was the perfect opportunity for Levy to elbow me out of the way for a moment. The Levys have been renovating a 1930s home in a small coastal community of Virginia. He explained how they had insisted on replacing worn and rotted materials with like kind, to preserve the home’s character. Points for Levy.

“I always tell people, if you’ve got a contemporary taste and you like an old house, don’t change the part that belongs to the house,” he explained, with a stressed tone. “Just decorate it different, or paint it different, but don’t change the detail of the mouldings, the flooring—all that kind of stuff.”

We agreed, in chorus, that modernizing an old home is a tragedy.

“And I’ve gone in and brought houses back, where people have ripped off all the ornate trim and put down the wrong type of flooring, and it’s just a total injustice for the house,” Silva said.

“Do you have any areas or certain types of houses you just adore?” I asked, then, immediately realizing I had just used the word “adore” with a man whose calluses could sand without paper, I added jokingly, “If I may use that word ... ‘adore?’” Silva laughed, and responded in a very subdued tone, “You can use it,” then replaced the term, “I don’t really have a favorite.”

I commented on older windows and how they’re usually first to go in the name of efficiency, alluding to a potential conflict between the green and historical preservation movements.

Silva trumped the notion.

“There are ways to make an old window more efficient, by removing the weights and pulleys, and they have a retractable spring system that goes in place,” he explained. “The window goes up and down on a retractable pulley that now allows you to insulate that cavity and make the window more efficient.”

“You weigh the sash and you order these things, they look like a tape measure, and you just pop them in with the screw holes, drop them down, tack them into the window and the weight and pulley are gone, but it looks and feels the same,” he said, as if we could follow the elaborate picture he envisioned so easily. “But that airspace is gone and that is what was costing you money,” he added.

The Professor Is In

Silva’s knowledge base was indestructible. He knows every aspect of homebuilding. There is literally no question this man flinches at, or even hesitates to answer.

Levy inquired about the cost of the show’s renovation projects and asked how much assistance it provides participants. He explained that the contracting service This Old House provides is no different than any other. They go over plans and discuss a budget just like any other contracting firm and the owner is responsible for the cost.

Then he revealed something astonishing.

“Most people are surprised by this, but, we don’t use a script on *This Old House*,” he said. “There’s literally one guy, with a camera, who follows us around shooting footage. That’s it.”

I commented that the show must have liter-



Silva gave two presentations that day, each filled with down-to-earth advice and discussions, followed by a question-and-answer session.

ally hundreds of new products thrown at it for each project.

“Just because we can get a product for free to use on a project, doesn’t mean I will use it,” he quickly explained. “I mean, they can say ‘Hey, we’ll give you all of this if you will use it,’ but I still won’t,” he said. “What I’ll do is, I’ll take it and use a little bit of it somewhere in my house, or somewhere I can watch it; then after a year or so, I’ll see how it does and what I think of it. Then, if I’m pleased with it, I’ll use it on somebody else’s project,” he assured.

I asked him if he was old-fashioned, or if he was willing to embrace the latest tool technologies.

“Oh yeah! Heck, I love technology,” he admitted. “I’ve got one of those GPS (global positioning system) navigation devices in my car. I don’t bother printing directions; I just put in where I’m going and turn when it says turn. It’s great,” he added.

Feeding the Masses

The car ride ended. Regretfully, we now had to share this walking encyclopedia of building knowledge with the rest of the world. And Silva may have made it out of the airport

without being bombarded, but he didn’t make it three steps from the car at this home show.

Every passerby, it seemed, stopped to shake his hand, commented on how he had inspired them over the years and then, inevitably, asked a question. He patiently and kindly addressed every single person, signing autographs for each.

As we entered the facility, a security guard called out, “Tom Silva! You’re my hero! But do you have any idea how much money you’ve cost me?” I thought he meant security had to be beefed-up for Silva’s arrival. Little did I know. Later in the day, the same guard explained to me that he tries nearly everything he sees on *This Old House* and has spent a fortune in the process, but loves every minute of it.

Eventually, Silva signed and answered his way to an area where he would give a presentation—two in fact. Even as he set up his Mac Book and connected it to a projector, he was able to answer questions. As his computer booted up, the background image gave something away. Silva is a boat lover; I suddenly remembered from his bio. But Silva’s boat ain’t wood.

I couldn’t resist.

“Mr. Silva, that boat isn’t made of wood,” I jested. He dished me a friendly, side-eyed glare that made it feel like we were on a jobsite somewhere heckling one another for a moment, but followed it with a grin, as if to say, “You got me kid.”

Following the first session, a line formed in front of him, as he “rested” in a nearby booth, where he would resume signing autographs and ... answering questions, of course.

In both sessions that day, his energy and enthusiasm was astounding. Each was followed by a question-and-answer session and, I’m convinced, the only thing stopping him from going on all day and night were the show’s time restrictions.

I waited until the final moments to request he sign the world’s greatest magazine [holding forth an issue of **SHELTER**] and the world’s second greatest magazine [holding forth a copy of *This Old House*, no offense to **SHELTER**’s many sister publications]. He laughed as he reached for his Sharpie.

“Don’t you ever get tired of this?” I asked.

“Sure I do,” he said. “Then I go to bed.”

