



## Big house, little house, back house, barn

BIG HOUSE is for socializing and sleeping. Little house is for the displaced, yet improved, larger kitchen. Back house, formerly the outbuilding dragged to a new position, facilitates the farm's ancillary business operations. The barn, well, serves as a barn, housing things that moo, oink, and cluck.

What does this unique architecture, prevalent only in the small pocket of New England, tell us about sustainable design? What lessons might we learn from the choices Yankee farmers made in 1830 in response to external economic pressures? Two decades short of two centuries later, do we have the tenacity that these early settlers exhibited? Are we willing to think like cathedral builders and commit to something that we may never see completed?

If you are intrigued by these questions, read on. If not, I invite you to concentrate your focus on the technical aspects of joinery. Don't consider the bigger picture of how our finished structures may be no different than stick frames. To be fair, I encourage you to decide only

after this review of the opinions of several accomplished "timber frame-friendly" scholars on why this makes sense. I hope something I convey here will motivate you to do business differently from mainstream North American home builders.

Wisdom is knowing; virtue is doing; true virtue is work completed in faith. When planning for this conference, three plenary speakers were invited whom the conference planners knew represented core Guild values. It is no accident that these seasoned, respected men—architect John Abrams, technology activist David Eisenberg, and architectural historian Tom Hubka—chose to speak about decisions we make for or against sustainable building practice. If we continue to incorporate standard building practices into timber frames, we are choosing a flawed and indefensible lifestyle. The standard building codes that we often see as restrictive actually set *the low bar* for quality and sustainable practices. Proposing alternatives, these speakers acknowledged, is a tough challenge. It is often a battle fought on faith, yet still a battle worth fighting.

The collective message of these three speakers resonated among those in attendance. My pre-conference seminar on best practices for sustainable design was sold out. Sessions on alternative building materials had the best attendance yet. All this indicates we are ready to start the journey.

Kicking off the first day was John Abrams. John is a 30-year veteran and founder of an employee-owned design-build company, the South Mountain Company, on Martha's Vineyard. John has recently completed the book *The Company We Keep: Reinventing Small Business for People, Community, and Place* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2005). It conveys the importance of people and relationships to business success. John cited the exponential growth and unparalleled precedent in the development of the internet as an event of such magnitude that it could never have been orchestrated by a single modern government or business. He then quoted the artist Bruce Mau's question, "Now that we can do anything, what will we do now?"

To stimulate outrageous thinking, John asked us to change our temporal frame of reference from days or quarters to decades, even centuries. Only then will we have the appropriate context to think like cathedral builders and to understand the iron will necessary to take on monumental tasks. Men and women who underpin their life's work by their core values (and not by their

completed works) have the makings of cathedral builders. John audaciously suggested that the TFG is a group of rugged individuals who meet these requirements. He counseled that the most difficult of tasks would fall easily into place if we made the right choices for our future.

"How do you know what you know?" asked David Eisenberg, who directs the Development Center for Appropriate Technology (DCAT) in Tucson; a copy of his presentation is at [www.dcat.net](http://www.dcat.net). DCAT envisions a world where communities thrive in harmony with nature because people understand the consequences of their choices and make decisions for their own and the Earth's benefit. David challenged Guild members to make choices that will lead to sustainable building and development. Rather than merely focusing on what's wrong or unsafe in buildings, as building codes do, he believes that "outrageous behavior" is the "most adult thing to do."

While frustrated by apparent neglect in building codes of anything important in the long term, David conveyed his appreciation for the difficulty we have seeing the unrecognizable. He quoted Russell Ackoff: "English does not contain a suitable word for a 'system of problems.' Therefore I have had to coin one. I choose to call such a system 'a mess.' The solution to a mess *can seldom be obtained* by independently solving each of the problems of which it is composed." He used another quote from *Natural Capitalism* (Hawken, A. Lovins, H. Lovins): "Opti-

mizing components of a system in isolation tends to *pessimize* the whole system.”

As David trained himself to see, he began to appreciate the undisturbed space between objects. From this, he became conscious of flows within a building and recognized the environment as a system of systems. He saw that we have an obligation to understand the complexity of the atmosphere within which we work. In the simplest of analogies, David recommended a Hippocratic-like oath, “Building should first do no harm.”

He suggested that the Guild is well positioned to understand the problem and the solution: we adopt the simplest technology that can do the job well. This approach makes it easier to avoid problems that plague the construction industry as a whole. Appropriate technology allows ordinary people to effect change and implement systems that “do not cause dependencies on systems outside our control.” He credits the industrial revolution with replacing the most renewable of resources on our planet—human power—with non-renewable resources and technology. Since TFG members seem to grasp this, we should start our journey by striving to understand the flows between our stuff and other people’s stuff. Since we don’t really know what we don’t know, David suggested a three-step process:

- Know where you are.
- Establish a clear vision of the future.
- Develop the courage to begin a long work.

This leads us to where I started: Tom Hubka, the third plenary speaker. Yankee farmers chose to take a stand for their values and lifestyle. They saw their very existence threatened by industrial mega-farms in the Midwest and the South, whose distribution to markets was enabled by government-subsidized “modern” railroads. Instead of forfeiting their lifestyle and their children’s future by moving further inland to richer pastures, these farmers, taking advantage of an architectural style that arose contemporaneously, adapted their homesteads to meet the new demands of agriculture and new cottage industries. Against difficult odds and using only ropes, oxen, and sweat equity, they rearranged their timber-framed outbuildings. Inefficient disparate buildings on

the farm became the model of efficiency for combined farming and small business operations. A new architecture of interconnected buildings was achieved, known today in the children’s ditty as Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn, also the title of one of Tom’s books. The imprint on the landscape represents a statement of values and a lesson to us all.

The Timber Framers Guild is uniquely positioned to make a positive impact on our cultural landscape. It starts with you and me. Our business is our way of life. We have an obligation to change the way we do business in a manner that reflects our core values. We must counsel new owners to consider the long-term impact of short-term buying decisions. We must take responsibility for helping design the building envelope that our frames support. We must be prepared to show a homeowner a life cycle cost analysis that demonstrates the investment they make in their structure and in our collective future.

We must fight the urge to succumb to the economic and political pressures that we’ve witnessed in the production home market. We should not let cost, schedule, and risk alone drive our businesses and our future. To make a virtuous difference, we must make alternative choices for health, comfort, safety, and energy efficiency. In sum total, these small incremental choices preserve the environment in a dramatic way for future generations. We must adopt an outrageous vision. We must think like cathedral builders.

—Al Wallace