

## ARCHITECTURE

by Ned Depew



**H**ow does one build a neighborhood? That was the question that occurred to David Lanoue when he first walked the 10-acre field just down the street from his workshop, on Van Deusenville Road, just north of the famous country church that is now the Guthrie Center, in the farm country between Great Barrington and Housatonic.

The field, with its gently swaying grasses and wildflowers and its uniquely framed view of the summit of Monument Mountain, appealed for thoughtful, gentle treatment that

Photos courtesy of David Lanoue



would preserve its simple beauty. The surrounding community suggested it should reflect an eclectic mix of aesthetics, each structure with a “personality” of its own.

The rest of the area is mostly rural-residential, with several beautiful period houses scattered among later arrivals. The Guthrie Center itself is turn-of-the-20th-Century Carpenter Gothic, but styles range from extended Colonial Farm Houses of the 18th Century to Ranch-style homes. Lanoue’s own workshop, built in the last decade, is a large timber-framed structure that could easily be mistaken for a 19th Century cow barn.

It’s an area that preserves a gallery of American architectural styles from three centuries. Since the area was first settled as much by the Dutch, pushing east from their bastions in New York and Fort Orange (Albany) and along the banks of the Hudson, as by the English, pushing west from their settlements along the Massachusetts coast, its early buildings carry both influences. “There’s a lot of Dutch influence right here in the Berkshires,” Lanoue notes. “People are just discovering how pervasive the Dutch influence was.”

It was those early homes that most inspired Lanoue, who has been in the construction business in the Berkshires since the late 1970s and has worked on historic homes of every period, as well as plenty of new construction. He has always been an advocate of preserving the area’s design heritage, and has always collected antique material salvaged from un-redeemable barns and buildings for use in future work, carrying their history on into future generations.

For this project (as he has for several previous ones), Lanoue chose architect Jack Sobon, who lives in nearby Windsor, MA, and has more than three decades of experience designing, building and teaching about the traditional techniques of “timber framing,” the fitted-and-joined-frame style of construction that was appropriate to the tools and materials available to early settlers. Sobon,

who has taught at Hancock Shaker Village and at the famed Heartwood School in Washington, MA, has built most of his career around combining modern technology with this enduring traditional technique to create homes of lasting appeal and unusual durability.

Looking over the property, Lanoue and Sobon agreed that what it most lent itself to was a “neighborhood,” a kind of a mini-hamlet within the larger hamlet of Van Deusenville that, although new, would reflect the traditional styles and values of the area. Working from a five lot site-plan established by the previous owner, they located five homes, carefully situated along two common driveways, that would give each house plenty of elbow room, take advantage of both the site’s views and its southern exposure, and preserve the sense of openness and the integrity of the meadow setting.

The theme of a small settlement of houses, clustered together (but not too closely), surrounded by open space that was sometimes originally “commons,” is reflected in the older sections of Berkshire towns from Alford to Mount Washington to Hancock. The New England traditions of neighborliness and tolerance are at least partly based on this spatial relationship, where individual families could band together in common purpose, yet still comfortably live their separate lives.

Sobon feels particularly strongly about what seems to be disappearing in contemporary residential building. “House designs are no longer related to the local tradition or climate. You can’t tell whether you are living in suburban Washington, DC, or New England,” he has written, “Many of today’s materials are made of plastics and laminates, which look great in the showroom, but don’t age gracefully. They don’t take on character, become burnished with time or have rich patinas.”

There’s a lack of authenticity to such construction and a lack of concern for its ramifications in the future that

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### Come to The Meadows

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bothers both men. Having spent so much time working on buildings that were meant to last, to be passed down from generation to generation and from family to family—as they have been—the “slap-em-up” approach of the McMansion “style” is a painful affront to a craft to which they’ve devoted their working lives. In many ways, The Meadows is their answer to that trend.

At a point in both their careers where they have some flexibility to take on a “labor of love,” The Meadows fit right in with that trajectory. Close to his workshop, where the timbers—many reclaimed from older buildings—will be cut and the strong joints that lock the frame together carefully fitted, the project will be one that Lanoue can easily oversee on a day-to-day basis, even while he attends to the many other threads of his company’s work.

Sobon and Lanoue have chosen a Dutch-influenced design for the first house. Sobon describes it: “It has a steeply pitched roof, harking back to the times when buildings were thatched with reeds. ...The floors are supported by huge timbers that span the full width of the house.

“Our west gable has a real brick facing with traditional iron ties called ‘murrankers’ that secure it to the timberwork. Inside, the thick floor planks, heavy timbers and tiled fireplace all enhance the early Dutch flavor of this home. The traditional casement windows with transoms have wide sills on the inside because of the house’s thick walls.”

But although the lines, proportions and detailing, inside and out, will accurately reflect historic design, its super-insulated construction and state-of-the-art mechanical systems will make it thor-

oughly modern in the best sense. Lanoue has been working for years with Craig Marden, from the University of Massachusetts Building Sciences program, to stay on the cutting edge of dependable new technology.

Built to meet or (mostly) exceed the guidelines of the “Res-Check” energy-efficiency standards of the state, Lanoue estimates that at today’s fuel prices, his 1,800–2,000 sq. ft. homes can be heated for around \$1,000 a year. With 10-inch thick walls filled with spray-foam insulation, which creates its own vapor-barrier as it seals against air-infiltration, and similarly effective super-insulation in the attic, these houses contain carefully calibrated ventilation systems with air-to-air heat exchange, to continuously distribute clean, fresh air throughout the house with minimal heat-loss.

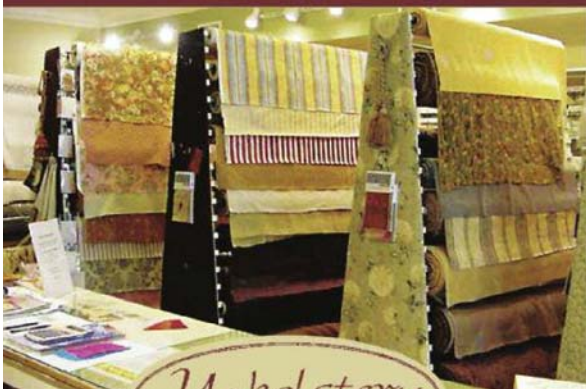
Modern Pella brand windows that reproduce the look of the original mullioned sashes, but use current technology with insulated multiple-panes and long-lasting, flexible, weather-tight sealing are another “upgrade” over the actual period homes. Fully-excavated, dry, insulated basements that provide storage and potential living space as well as convenient installation for mechanical systems and access for upgrades as needed are a feature almost none of the period homes can boast—as is the “designed-in” indoor plumbing (the homes will have two or more full baths).

The houses on which Sobon’s designs are based (Lanoue likes to call them “replications,” rather than “reproductions”) have stood the test of time. Just as many timber-framed buildings have continued to stand for several centuries, while most stick-framed buildings have had a much shorter life-span, so the classic proportions and lines of the designs have a timeless appeal. The pair’s decision

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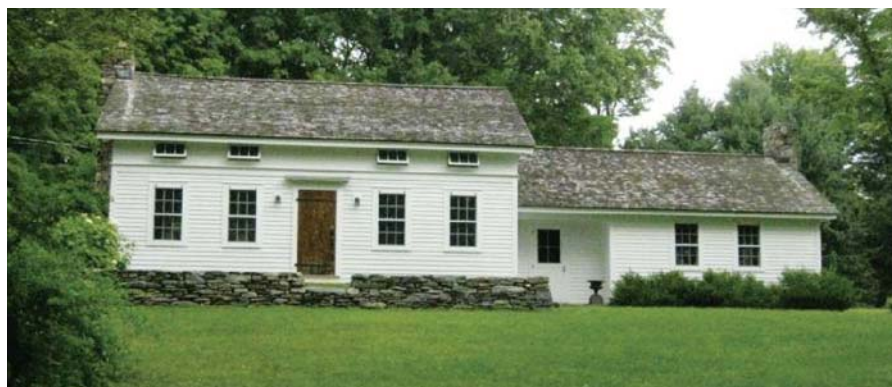


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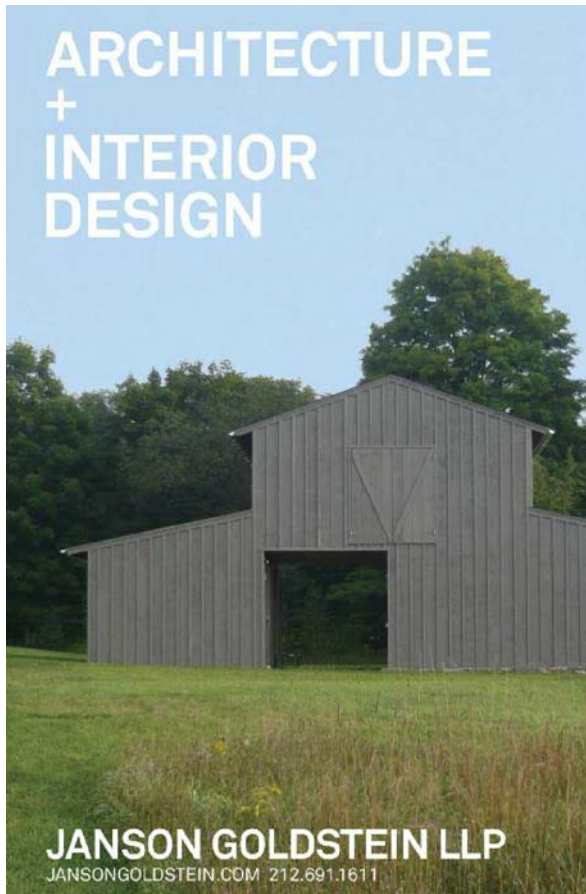


to build each house to a different design, with different roof lines, orientations and configurations will emphasize the individuality of each property, while the site-plan and the overarching vision bring them into a cohesive whole.

Although it is a planned "development" of a piece of property, it is the antithesis of the Levittown model of "development," with its cookie-cutter houses, and the suburban sprawl and McDevelopment that have arisen from that. Lanoue and Sobon are building homes for families that they hope and expect will put down roots in the local community. They are incorporating some of the region's history—both aesthetic and material—in the buildings, and fully expect their grandchildren to be able to come and visit the homes their grandfathers built, possibly with succeeding generations of the original owners' families still living in them.


It's a builder's dream—to create an attractive, lasting, practical building that can encompass all those qualities that really mean "home" to a family and serve its needs, now and for decades to come. It's a way of honoring the builders who came before, whose techniques, materials and aesthetics are incorporated in these new structures, while making the most of refinements, techniques, materials and systems that have developed in the modern era. It's a beautiful dream, which Lanoue and Sobon are turning into a beautiful reality.

To learn more about the dream (or even explore becoming part of it), you can call David E. Lanoue, Inc, Engineers, Architects, Builders, at 413/298-4621, in Stockbridge, MA. Their website, with many examples of their past work, is [www.lanoueinc.com](http://www.lanoueinc.com).



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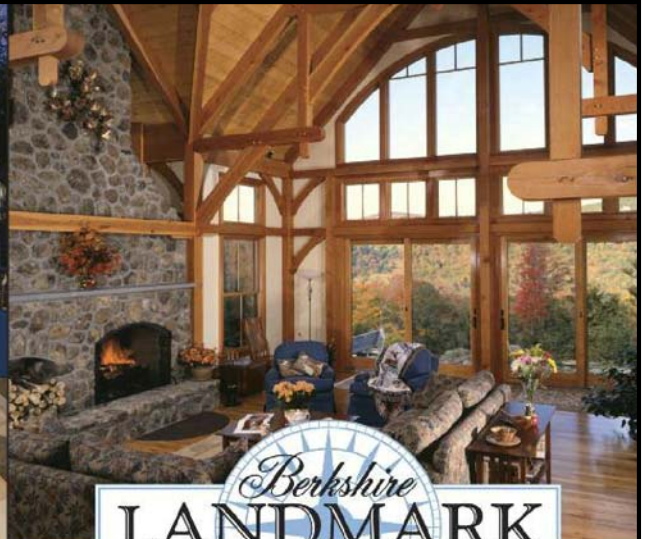
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