

A man with a mustache, wearing a red and blue jacket, is leaning over a large set of architectural blueprints spread out on a table. He is in a large, industrial-style building with a high ceiling and many windows. The building's interior features a complex network of steel beams and trusses. The man is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The blueprints he is looking at show detailed floor plans and structural drawings.

BACKYARD

Everything Old is New Again

Builder David Lanoue is known for traditional fine workmanship and a deep appreciation for the past

WRITTEN BY CLARENCE FANTO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN G. DONALDSON

Nestled in the peaceful Housatonic River Valley in the shadow of Monument Mountain is a collection of historic barns—a Shangri-la along the long-traveled Van Deusenville Road. Just down the road from the Guthrie Center is the workshop complex of David E. Lanoue, Inc., where “Back to the Future” might well serve as the company motto.

Building-and-design general contractor dedicated to historic preservation, Lanoue occupies five and a half acres in the Van Deusenville section of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, two miles south of the village of Housatonic. The main building includes an expansive, steel-frame main shop and a nearby timber-frame woodworking shop along the Housatonic Railroad freight line. Here, the soft-spoken Lanoue, 56, presides over a staff of fifteen specially trained craftsmen, all on a mission to preserve and restore traditional New England architecture.

The low-profile company offers stem-to-stern site assessment, engineering, architectural, and construction services—even maintenance and systems monitoring once a project is completed. It’s one-stop shopping for clients who want to restore existing timber-frame barns or purchase from an on-site collection of early timber-frame buildings and authentic replicas.

Taking a break from a busy work schedule on a spare afternoon in early autumn, Lanoue projects modesty as well as pride in the workmanship his company offers. A Boston native, he credits his late father Joseph, a master carpenter, with passing on an appreciation of historic architecture. “He gave me a great boost with that sort of thing,” he recalls. “We were surrounded by early architecture and the flavor of the people who created it in the western area of Massachusetts, especially Concord and Arlington.”

Lanoue attended schools in Acton and Cambridge, and went on to St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. “I started working for my father when I was twelve,” he says. “You’re absorbing things you don’t even realize at the time. Then, as a young man, I said, ‘That’s what I want to do—go outside every day and find out more about the old buildings.’”

Lanoue opened his company in 1978, on a site adjoining an old railroad station in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, offering general contracting services while building on his experience with early New England architecture. Requiring more space, he moved to Van Deusenville five years ago, building a new shop from the ground up over several years. “It’s not an easy thing finding so-called industrial space—no one wants it in their backyard,” he acknowledges. “This was part of an old farm and it felt right.” Lanoue credits Lee Clark for financing the project at an undisclosed cost. The company’s home office remains in Stockbridge, on a back street near the Red Lion Inn.

Lanoue says he has two or three major projects going at one time, in addition to “satellite jobs, the people whom we work for that we continue to take care of, smaller things I’m inked about.... The jobs are relatively complex today,

Quality by Definition

As•cen•tek (ə-sĕn'tĕk) *n.* **1.** A company specializing in network design and engineering; security assessment and management; IT consulting and sales. **2.** A team of highly-skilled certified network engineers. **3.** A Berkshire-based business offering expert technology solutions and services since 2000.

USAGE: “Network reliability and security are essential to our business and **Ascentek** always delivers. Their raw talent, responsiveness and attention to detail are unmatched.”
 (~Tim Doyle – Legacy Banks)

Ascentek

TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

7 Westview Road • Pittsfield, MA 01201

413 - 496 - 9900

www.ascentek.com

IT Solutions Network Design and Security PC Repair Sales

BELLA FLORA / BERGER'S SPECIALTY FOODS / MAZZEO'S MEAT & SEAFOOD / THE MARKETPLACE KITCHEN

**working lunch?
 breakfast meeting?
 board of trustees dinner?
 welcome fruit baskets?
 fresh flower arrangements?**

YES, WE CAN!



GUIDO'S
 FRESH
 MARKETPLACE
 GT. BARRINGTON & PITTSFIELD
 www.guidosfreshmarketplace.com



CARPENTER
GERRY LAFLAMME
AT WORK IN
THE CABINET
AND CUSTOM
MILLWORK SHOP.

and I find with a small group such as ours, you can only take on so much and do it well. Quality wins out, in the end.”

Lanoué credits the surging interest in timber-framing over the last twenty years with shifting his priorities toward historic preservation. “What we [have discovered] about early structures just in the past thirty years, the knowledge that has been assembled, is just unbelievable,” he marvels. He describes his clientele as a mix of “well-traveled” New Yorkers, Bostonians, and Berkshire residents, as well as a small following from farther afield. “We do actually move buildings long distances,” he says, citing a specialty project last year that involved the restoration and transport of a sizable German swing-beam wheat barn for a client’s mountain lodge in southern California. But that was a rare event; most clients are within twenty minutes of his shop in Great Barrington.

Lanoué’s company works closely with clients on every aspect of construction—including timber-framing, cabinetry, and interior finishing work: “We do everything the house needs, including furniture, cabinets, you name it.”

The process begins with a site visit and historic survey of a house to determine whether it has a post-1800 or pre-1800 frame. Dendrochronology, a study of tree rings based on core samples from the timber, can determine exactly when the trees were felled for the house or barn construction. “Careful research is the key. We can tell the story of the house and then produce an accurate restoration,” Lanoué explains. “Many times, you don’t need to fuss with the design at all. Later additions, changes, and so-called modernization are what really do a job on these early buildings. You’ve got to know what to disturb and what not to.”

Customers seeking an authentically restored New England house or barn for their property can explore Lanoué’s inventory of some twenty to twenty-five eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings, on view in the fields surrounding his shop and in storage. He boasts an extensive collection of pre-1850 barns and houses with timber-frame construction reflecting English, French, and German building traditions—particularly the English influence stemming from the arrival of early settlers moving north and west out of the Connecticut Valley. He has collected Dutch barns as well, reflecting the prevailing style just over the state line in Dutchess, Columbia, and Rensselaer counties as well as the Hudson and Mohawk River Valleys. Prices vary across a wide range, Lanoué says: “It depends on how unique the structure is, and on its antiquity.”

DESPITE A BACKLOG OF PROJECTS, LANOUE IS COMMITTED TO MAINTAINING THE CURRENT SIZE OF HIS COMPANY. A SMALL AND FOCUSED STAFF IS BEST FOR THE KINDS OF PROJECTS HIS COMPANY TAKES ON.



Every Community Has At Least One REALTOR® Like Nancy Kalodner.
(In the Berkshires, it's Nancy Kalodner.)

BENCHMARK REAL ESTATE
413-528-9595

**The bank
for your
business.**

Lee Bank is a local, independent, community bank that focuses on commercial businesses like yours.

We're ready to talk business.

Please contact:

Rich Aldrich
Senior Vice President

413-243-9231

raldrich@leebank.com



MEMBER FDIC/MEMBER OF EQUAL HOUSING LENDER



In keeping with his self-described “very private” nature, Lanoue doesn’t disclose revenue figures but says, “We’re not a great business model. We’ve grown slowly but steadily over the years—we’re at least five times bigger now, which is a modest increase.” He acknowledges that the vagaries of the economy have some impact, “but we’re in a small group, in sort of a niche, so we seem to ride the ups and downs pretty well.”

In recent years, Lanoue has gradually expanded his staff, which consists mostly of Berkshire natives with specialized training. “We find that the education level of the individual interested in what we do and the way we do it is very, very high,” he says. “We’ve home-grown most of our talent, and we’re very happy about that.” They could earn more money elsewhere, he adds, but they’re trading that for a quality of life and experience here.

Lanoue expresses special pride in his 2006 restoration of the Brethren Shop at Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The building, dating from around 1813, had to be partially disassembled because of major structural problems. “They’ve done a lot of very good research there—we found hand tools in the walls, so we were able to do nail analysis and understand the different changes in the buildings that were at odds with the written record,” Lanoue explains. “There were quite a few changes in the building and the way it was used. That was surprising to us—there was a story within a story there. A very satisfying job.”

“David helped us with an \$80,000 to \$100,000 restoration that had compo-



nents that were straightforward and others that required detective work," says Ellen Spear, president of Hancock Shaker Village. "We enjoyed working with him because of his appreciation for the history and significance of our building and his knowledge of nineteenth-century technique. He really understands how buildings are put together. People can see the results."

Spear hopes to collaborate with Lanoue again, once funding has been raised for an \$875,000 to \$1 million project to stabilize the exterior of the Trustees Office, one of the oldest buildings on the Shaker Village property, dating from 1793. "It requires the kind of detective work and meticulous technique that we think Dave is great at," she says.

Most of Lanoue's work is for private clients, with a typical project extending from six months to two years. "We've been very blessed to have had the opportunity to work on quite a few beautiful places over the past twelve to fifteen years," he says. "Many of these places are not appreciated from the road—a lot of people don't even know they're there. Somebody said not too long ago that we're the best-kept secret in the Berkshires. That's because our people are private people, and their places are out of the way in many cases."



How David Lanoue Does it

Favorite productivity tools?

A race knife, which is hand-held, unfolds like a jackknife, and its blade has a hook. It was used to write Roman numerals on timber-frame buildings, runs of boards, and early sawmills. Also, a boring machine, which is like a derrick with a seat and two handles like an egg-beater—you'd be surprised at how it bores holes, it's amazingly efficient. These are favorites because of their link with the past, but we don't get a chance to use them enough.

Business publications you read?

The *Wall Street Journal* and the *Economist*.

Books that had an impact on how you do business?

James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*, and *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century*.

Have you had a mentor?

My father, a carpenter all his life. I worked with him from a very young age and that made quite an impression on me. And also Jack Sobon, an architect and timber-frame specialist in Windsor, Massachusetts.

Your iPod playlist includes ...

No iPod, but everything from J.S. Bach to Chick Corea on my car and home stereos.

Most recent business purchase over \$5,000?

A Terex telehandler, which is an all-terrain forklift with a telescopic boom. You can stop the machine and reach forward 15 feet.

The Berkshire-based business you most admire:

Betr Engineering and Construction, based in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and the Dresser-Hull Company in Lee, Massachusetts.



office space available

PRIME OFFICE SUITES

Room to meet the needs of your growing business with suites from 1000 to 5000 s.f. available. For information and lease opportunities, contact us at:

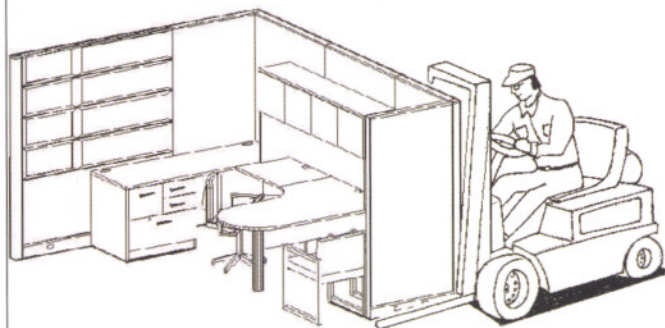
Scarafoni Associates

David Carver

dcarver@scarafoniassociates.com

413 664-4539 x 12

or view available spaces at scarafoniassociates.com



"WE'LL MOVE YOUR ENTIRE OFFICE!"

BBE OFFICE INTERIORS

122 NORTH STREET PITTSFIELD MA. 01201

(413) 442-8217 WWW.BBEOFFICE.COM



An example is a three-year restoration of the General Ashley House, a prominent yellow Georgian home in the Ashley Falls section of Sheffield (not to be confused with the nearby Colonel Ashley House, a museum maintained by the Trustees of Reservations). Lanoue says he took a special interest in working with the owner, the late Jeffrey Casdin; the house—built by Colonel John Ashley in the mid-1700s for his son, who became Major General John Ashley—remains in the Casdin family.

Despite a growing backlog of projects—“It’s very hectic, quite amazing”—Lanoue says he’s committed to maintaining the current size of his company.

A small and focused staff, he says, is best for the kinds of projects his company takes on. “This is not normal construction, not off-the-shelf, there’s a lot that goes into it,” Lanoue maintains. “We use a lot of local resources, we patronize local merchants, sawyers, and blacksmiths. We like to see all the old trades stay as strong as possible. We’re very much in tune with the revival of early American crafts. I think there’s going to be a new call for it.”

Lanoue predicts a major sea change in how Americans live as they cope with the worldwide energy and economic crisis. “We’re going to go back to the old ways, and people are going to be happier

for it. No choice—we won’t be turning the clock back, it’ll be turned back for us. I think it’s very difficult today [because] there aren’t many people who know how to do things. They’re not being taught. Computer knowledge is essential for everyone to some extent, but at the end of the day, if something has to be moved from A to B, something has to be produced, we’ve gotten away from being a nation of producers. We’re a nation of consumers, and that’s not so good for us.”

Lanoue points out that his company uses many hand tools because they’re often faster than power tools.



TAKEAWAY

DELIVER FINE CRAFTSMANSHIP

Maintain a standard of excellence in workmanship, including the preservation of historic craft and technique, in building lasting, quality structures.

PROVIDE IN-HOUSE TRAINING

In the kind of fine construction David Lanoue provides, having his skilled carpenters share their knowledge with younger workers creates a new generation of builders and preserves the traditional trades.

APPRECIATE THE PAST

Preserving historic buildings and employing time-tested techniques has turned into a unique marketing niche for David Lanoue.

"If somebody pulls the cord out, we can continue to work," he says. "We're teaching young people, who then teach even younger people. We're sort of a guild here in this shop—people are learning how to do things, and that makes for a stronger community."

Lanoue describes his managerial duties as "much more than I care to do sometimes, but it's a necessary evil." What inspires him most is hands-on involvement in the craftsmanship of his trade. A typical Lanoue project embodies his dedication to the qualities and values of the past—"not fancy, but solid," as he describes it. The stone, timber, ironwork, and level of trim are distinctive, as are the hand-made moldings, which are rarely seen anymore.

The company celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in July 2007 with a celebration at the shop featuring the Acoustic Blue band. "It was a great affair," Lanoue says. "Over three hundred people came, all our customers, suppliers, subcontractors, and friends."

Lanoue views Berkshire County as a model for a greener, environmentally sensitive outlook, with an emphasis on using local, sustainable resources. "We have a real opportunity in this region to be self-sustaining and productive, to enjoy a higher quality of life," he says. Summing up his approach to life and work, he emphasizes, "It's not only what you do, but the way you do it—the workmanship and spirit you bring to any endeavor. I think you have to look to the past to understand. Certain timeless attitudes and ways of approaching things matter and last, and make for a richer and more efficient life." **BBQ**

Freelance writer Clarence Fanto is a frequent contributor to BBQ: Berkshire Business Quarterly and Berkshire Living.

THE RECIPE

DAVID E. LANOUE, INC. BUILDING AND DESIGN
13 SHAMROCK ST.
STOCKBRIDGE, MASS.
413.298.4621
WWW.LANOUEINC.COM