

*Peg Kamens, Common Ground Center co-founder, maintained a blog about the construction of the Eco-Lodge from 2010-2011. The Eco-Lodge has been in use for several years now, and it's safe to say that all the hard work that went into it has paid off as countless groups have had the opportunity to enjoy the lodge in all of Vermont's glorious seasons.*



November 9, 2010

If the last thing you read about the lodge was the newsletter you received a week or so ago, your information is already out of date – a necessary by-product of the long turnaround for a newsletter and the brief one for construction progress. So for those interested, I'll try to post something every



week so you can join me in a constant state of excitement and wonder (maybe we should take medication to deal with this).

Standing outside the lodge, you'll notice a few things right away. Carl Shepherd, who built the stone wall outside the Haybarn, is hard at work again. He's covering up the blueboard insulation under the Common Room with stones mostly from our property, making the building look more grounded (and less like it's floating in space).

The exterior windows and doors are all in, and the doors are all framed. The exterior pine siding is up on the guest room portion of the building – the boards are awaiting their battens. And there's a real roof on all of the building except the part that is awaiting its living roof – that will be installed in the spring. No sense planting in Vermont in November, even on a roof.



From the inside, even more progress has been made. The rooms are all clearly defined now – the sheetrock is in, so I've lost the powerful feeling of being able to pass through the walls like a Harry Potter ghost. Skylights are installed, shedding light below in the front rooms. And the clerestory windows high up in the north facing rooms really add a lot more light than I had imagined!

The Common Room is a wonder – your eye is constantly drawn to the mountain view in the distance - no other artwork is really needed. The “warmboard” and tubing for the radiant heat floors are all in. The office staff went up and decided what furniture we'll want for the space – tables for dining, couches and chairs for sitting by the fire or staring out the window. Or both.

The bathrooms all have the rough plumbing, with the shower stall now clearly defined – and a bathtub is installed in one of the rooms as well. The best thing in the bathrooms

is the light you can't turn off – the sun streaming in through the solar tube. Though on a cloudy November day, we take all the light we can get.

What you won't see is all the stuff they crammed into the walls – tons of insulation (rigid outside, rock wool and fiber inside), plus tons of pipes, electrical wires and the like. There're even hook-ups for the washer/dryers in the laundry room. The sprinkler system, tho, will be reassuringly visible, for all of you suffering from pyrophobia.

And then there is the wonder of the “utility room.” I know what is slated for that small space – storage tanks for the solar-heated water, an amazingly efficient furnace, water filtration tank – like the proverbial group of clowns crammed into the Volkswagen Bug. The technicians were fighting to get their tubes and pipes in here first, for assured “seating.”



That's all I've room for now – more news in the weeks to come!

November 19, 2010

Today our architect, Carol Stenberg, left Vermont for a long-awaited sailing trip. I am holding my breath and hoping I can get along for a month without her keen insights, attention to detail, and unerring aesthetic sense. Happy sails to you, Carol (and call me the second you reach landfall).

In the hectic last days before Carol took off, we had to decide on wall finishes. As the weather turns, the work will proceed indoors, and an elaborate dance will be necessary to coordinate the various wall and floor treatments that will make the room come alive. A skeleton of wood framing, and veins of electrical wire and mechanical pipes, now live in the walls. They have already been covered up by the skin of sheetrock. Now we need to apply some makeup.

Carol is a huge fan of natural materials and color. When my commitment to natural clay plaster finishes for the walls waivered, she tricked me into seeing the sample walls they have at Planet Hardwood. My resistance melted away. The natural clay is beautiful, it breathes, it doesn't attract mold, it is easy to retouch, and it adds a feeling of warmth to the room.

Three of the walls in each room will be covered with clay plaster. Below the clay, at the base of the walls, hardwood or pine panels (wainscoting) will protect the lower wall and add a rustic feel. The fourth wall, usually the tall wall at the back of the room, will be painted sheetrock, a surface best adapted to reflect and enhance the natural light. It sounds like a win-win compromise.



Our own Rick Davis - our former caretaker, CGC staffer and current Starksboro neighbor - will be putting the primer on the walls next week. A primer mixed with sand is necessary to ensure that the clay adheres to the wall. We will be using a low or no VOC primer that is made only with plant-based materials – no chemicals. It costs a pretty penny but it is worth it.

Rick was a little hesitant about using different colors for each of the rooms but Carol is very persuasive – she noted that the differing color treatments are part of the “joy” of experiencing the building. We compromised – maybe we’ll use a smaller palette, but still a lot of colors.

Carol also picked out the tile for the showers – tiles with the look of stone, enhancing the natural feel of the building. They will be accented by a ribbon of color.

Finally, Carol and builder Laurie Smith took Jim and me on a field trip to Charlotte, to see a few houses with polished cement floors. The amber color won out – it is rich and has the look of worn leather. I think it will be grounding.

Luckily, I've run out of room just as I've run out of things to say. More news next week, as we finish up the exterior work on the building, shiver against the looming cold, and come inside.

November 23, 2010

If there is anything more gloomy than a drippy November day just before Thanksgiving, it can only be a Harry Potter Dementor. Quick, get me some chocolate!

I forced myself away from my comfortable desk today, to take a look at the Lodge, so I could give you an update before I take off for Thanksgiving. I'm going to the nation's capitol – oh my God, that'll be even more depressing. I think I prefer the Dementors - and I think they're about to take over Congress.

Anyway, I realized that, despite the wet chill, I should take you on a brief tour of the Lodge exterior before I duck back inside.

The outside of the Common Room is now totally sheathed in what is called “novelty siding.” This is wood that has a top rounded “scallop” on one side and an overlap (shiplap) on the other. The shiplap side of one board goes over another board's scalloped edge, creating a seal against the weather. The result is a distinctive surface, with an interplay of light and shadow where the two pieces of wood join. As with all of our siding, the novelty siding was milled locally from our own wood.

Looking at the Lodge from the outside, you can now enjoy the contrast of the vertical lines of the board and battens on the guestroom side of the building with the horizontal lines of the novelty siding. Even more contrast is provided by the stones that Carl Shepard has placed at the base of the novelty siding. Carl's got the project about 2/3 completed, working even in today's soaking rain. Even his dog Stoney has deserted him for the dry floor of his truck.





Gutters are now up on the north side of the building, to move the rainwater away from folks trying to enter the building (I tested it today and it works!) Pat Hendee, our local excavator, has been leveling the landscape immediately outside the building to create easier access for wheelchair users. I stayed in the mobile home during my wheelchair days, so I can tell you that the easier (ie non--terrifying) trip to the rest of campus will be appreciated.

That's about all for today. Happy Thanksgiving! We can all use some tryptophan, I'm sure.

December 8, 2010

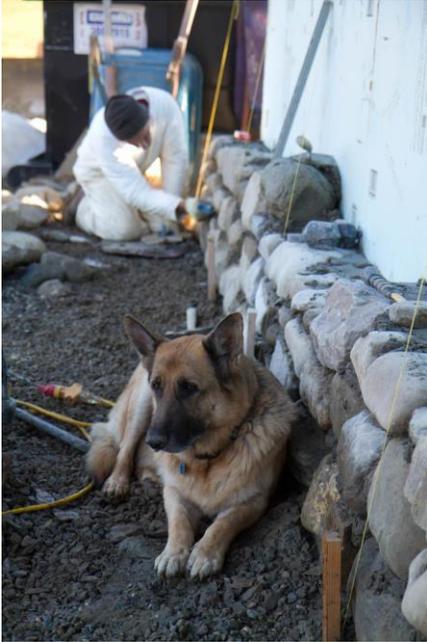
Early December light is a fleeting thing in Vermont. This makes for short workdays for those who toil outside. Couple this with early December's last desperate days of hunting season, as important in the construction trades as Christmas break is to school kids, and throw in a windstorm with gusts up to 90 miles an hour, whipping past the Lodge, upending the construction port-a-potty and dismembering the protective tent that kept materials dry. Not a time you'd like to be on a scaffold outdoors.



The upshot of all this – not much to report this week, so, as the construction work slowed down, I slacked off. But not to disappoint Susanna, who may be the sole reader of these notes, here it is – a not-too-late update, I hope.

The siding on the Lodge is almost completely installed now – the wall that has the clerestory windows is cloaked in the horizontal novelty siding, contrasting with the

vertical board and batten below. The battens, which cover up the space between the boards, are not installed on the north and south walls at this time. This will facilitate installation of fire alarms, which will require chinks in the siding to slide the wires through. Once the fire alarms are installed, the battens can be attached. At least the rooms are more airtight now, thanks to the installation of handles on the outside doors.



Bad weather does not seem to affect Carl Shepard, whose work with heavy rocks at least guarantees that his building materials will not blow away. Carl has a pretty good work plan. On nice days (in early December in Vermont - really?), Carl works on the last stone wall outside the Common Room, his dog Stoney sniffing nearby. On wretched days, which seem far more common, Carl moves under the covered porch and lays the slate pathway; Stoney sleeps in the truck. Stoney is my new weather channel – Stoney outside = rare sunshine; Stoney in the truck = weather emergency.

Much better to be inside. Painter Rick Davis has been toiling away, and has completed painting the east-west “party wall” that separates the north and south facing rooms. This is the highest wall and the one furthest away from the natural light streaming from the windows. It will be covered only with paint, a better reflective surface than clay plaster. The bunkbeds will be resting against this wall as well, so durability of finish is key.

Rick has also finished painting most of the bathrooms. With the walls completed, preparation can be made to install the fixtures (sinks, toilets, lights). This should be happening over the next few weeks.

Finally, we had a few exciting deliveries last week. The woodstove arrived, as did the super-efficient furnace – I am told the latter is the size of a suitcase! Stacks of maple flooring – yes, harvested from our woods, milled, shaped and dried nearby – are now cluttering the Common Room. These arrived early so they can adjust to the climate of the room, to minimize shrinkage. And some of our remaining unfinished pine was

removed from the large outdoor piles and carted off to Lathrop's mill in Bristol, There it will be kiln dried and cut and dressed for interior uses, principally wainscoting.

That's all, folks. Much more this Friday, after the busy week ahead.

December 17, 2010

I'm afraid we can't beat Brooklyn for weird weather events this year – tornados, hailstones the size of marbles. But we've had our own quirky Vermont-scale weather oddities – two unpredicted heavy snowfalls, unreasonably cold temperatures. So things have been crawling along a bit on the construction front. But the foundation has been laid for the coming cascade of building progress.



Heavy snowfall means snow removal means Carl Shepard and Stoney have been plying their winter trade. Now Stoney in the truck = snow plowing. Despite these obstacles, the last bit of stone wall is almost complete, ready for the stone cap that will be delivered from Vermont Stoneworks next week. The cap will cover the little bit of blue insulation that now sticks out above the stone wall, and will protect the wall from the ravishments of rain and ice. The slate path under the porch overhang is about 60% complete, stretching beyond room 3, which has been serving as John Perkins office. It looks amazing!

Our own Rick Davis has also completed stage one of his work. Rick spent the better part of a week applying the special primer that will underlay the clay plaster walls. Suspended in the primer is a gritty sand; the primer must be stirred constantly so the sand is well distributed. This provides a rough surface to keep the clay from sliding off the walls – which might have been fun for our young potters, but not for our wall plasterers.



With the walls now prepped, several projects can proceed this week and next. First, the polished concrete floors can be painted the rich amber color we've selected. Indeed, this work has already begun, with a first layer of acid wash applied to the floors on the north side of the building. And the maple flooring can be installed over the radiant floor "warmboards" in the Common Room. In fact, right on schedule, Tor is cutting the beautiful maple boards from our trees and laying them on the floor side by side.

Once the flooring is set, the wooden panels or wainscoting can be installed to cover the bottom portion of the walls. Most of the wainscoting will be from pine that we logged on site. We're hoping to have enough birch and oak from the harvest to line

the walls in at least a few rooms. Then the rustic-looking trim boards, with a bit of bark clinging to one edge, can be installed to frame the windows and doors.

What could make these rooms feel more cozy than some heat supplied by our new fancy Viessmann boiler? Heating expert Robert Pitt was on site today, trying to explain the vast circuitry of pipes running from the super-efficient hot shot boiler to the rooms beyond. Robert told me that the system will have both the boiler, powered by propane, and hot water tanks, heated by roof-mounted solar panels. A sensor between the two will suss out when the solar heat is insufficient and switch on the boiler. And presumably switch it off when it is no longer needed. (Yeah, I think magic is involved too.) The gas lines will be attached to the boiler this week. And voila – a real building with heat to withstand whatever additional weather this season brings.

That's it for now. One more installment next week before we're all subsumed by the holidays!

December 24, 2010

Yeah, I know, the day before Christmas. Get a life, Peg! I can guarantee you no one else in Vermont is working today. Hell, no one else appears to have been working all week, which is why I have so little to report on new site developments.

Although, in fairness, I did run into Robert the Heating Guru, putting ever more copper tubing on the incredibly cluttered walls of the utility room. He rushed our application for state energy incentives to the government offices yesterday – the funds for this ran out a few months ago, but a small pile of money was found to cover some more projects. I hope he made it there on time – it would be a great holiday gift!

I thought I'd use the news lull at the end of the year for a brief disquisition on interior finishes. I've been nonchalantly throwing around the words "low VOC paint" as if I knew what they meant. I'll tell you what a little post hoc research has revealed.

VOCs are Volatile Organic Compounds, chemically unstable items that turn into gas or combine with other chemicals. If you are with them in a room, you're going to be breathing them in. While not all VOCs are harmful, the only ones regulated by the EPA are those that contribute to outdoor smog. So some toxic chemicals like acetone (nail polish remover) can be included in "zero-VOC" products.

To ensure that you don't breathe any of this in, we went to Planet Hardwood, a local store that sells AFM Safecoat products. This manufacturer guarantees that its primers and paints are odor-free and contain no toxic materials, whether regulated, below the limits for mandatory disclosure or not regulated at all. The primer and paints we are using in the Lodge are either very low or no-VOC. They contain nothing that would harm people or the earth. Amazing that this standard is cutting edge. A few of the walls in the Lodge will be covered with paint only – to reflect light and add brightness to the room and for extra durability. The other walls will be covered with a tinted clay plaster. While plaster is more labor-intensive to apply than paint alone, it has several real advantages. First, it is drop dead gorgeous – not the most important attribute, but undeniable. It is also less toxic and energy intensive to produce than other wall coverings and is easily repaired.



The most significant thing about clay plaster is going to sound a little woo woo, but here goes. Indoor spaces are filled with positive ions from electric appliances and synthetic materials. Fresh air, in contrast, is filled with negative ions, which promote energy and improved mood. As natural clay absorbs moisture and dries out through changes in humidity, it releases negative ions. These increase our capacity to absorb oxygen, increase our levels of serotonin, relieve stress and boost our feelings of well-being. Who needs yoga?

Clay plaster is healthy in other ways as well. It does not mold. It also helps filter air of pollen and dander - the negative ions eliminate static, causing airborne particulates to clump together and fall to the floor, where they can be vacuumed up. Deepak Chopra meets Mr. Clean.

The bathroom walls will be covered in ceramic tiles, which are chemically inert (ie no-VOC) – they do not absorb or emit pollutants. They also do not support bacterial or fungal growth – making them ideal for high moisture environments. The tiles we are purchasing from Best Tiles, a local store, are produced by a natural manufacturing process, using simple non-toxic minerals and clays. The cement-based setting and grouting materials are also no-VOC.

And lastly, the final finish to discuss is for flooring. Architect Carol Stenberg posed a series of choices, but it was clear where her heart was. So we're using linseed oil on the maple floors. Linseed oil is an old-fashioned wood finish, often used abroad. It comes from flaxseed – what could be more healthy? It contains no dangerous chemicals. Unlike polyurethanes, it protects the wood by being absorbed into the grain, not by simply coating it, bringing out a slightly darker, warmer color. If the finish wears unevenly, the wood can be protected by buffing the areas that need extra attention, rather than redoing the whole floor.

That brings me to the end – I'm finished with finishes. I'll also be taking a break from these weekly updates for a while. Our family is leaving on Sunday for Ecuador for a few glorious weeks. Of course, it's really a work-related trip – got to see what our eco-tourism competitors are doing in other settings. Visit a few eco-lodges and study their finishes. What else would you expect from a workaholic who would toil away on Christmas Eve?

Happy Holidays! I'll be back sometime in January with more updates.

January 28, 2011

Well, we're back from Ecuador, enriched by our stay at various eco-lodges, and thinking about our own Lodge for this summer. Some things I've learned:

- The use of color contrast adds a lot of interest to a space, no matter how modest
- Hot water is nicer in a shower than cold, even if the weather is hot outside.
- It's helpful when you can brush your teeth with the tap water, unless you like the weight-reducing option of the permanent upset stomach.



I also learned about the by-products of oil extraction for the Amazon region – health issues from compromised ground-water, threats to traditional communities, elimination of important habitat. So I'm glad we elected to have a low carbon profile for our new building – it's more than a matter of personal virtue.

Our lodge is moving inexorably towards completion. There's an elaborate choreography that takes place in construction, so each element that moves the interior work along is dependent on others being done in the proper order. First, the dirty work of installing sheetrock and pouring concrete shower drains has to happen. Then the walls are painted, the solar tubes and ceiling fixtures installed. Next, it's time to stain the floors, a multistep process involving four separate applications of

stain or preservative. Then there are two parallel tracks: tiling the shower precedes putting in bathroom fixtures; wainscoting and window trim in the guestrooms happens before clay plaster walls. And then, mostly, you're done.

More or less following this basic plan, each room is taking its own path toward eventual occupancy – kind of like children developing on their very individual timetables. Six of the guest rooms have the strikingly beautiful stain on their polished concrete floors. The two others are a bit more delayed, with final work on the bathrooms to be done before the floor-staining. Some rooms of the building have the clay plaster on the walls, but no wood panels. Other rooms have the panels but no clay plaster finish. And some rooms are waiting for both.

Then there's the Common Room. The beautiful maple floors have been laid down, full of character and variable color. Most of the wainscoting is up, beautiful pine boards laid horizontally. The windows are trimmed with a "waney" side – the edge of the board right under the bark, with an irregular line shaped by nature. Next the kitchen will be installed – pine lower cabinets, an oak top, simple pine shelves above, and energy star appliances appropriately spaced. When the kitchen is complete, the room, now used as the construction workshop, will be cleared out so the floors can be coated with linseed oil and the walls can be plastered. Last step will likely be the lighting fixtures and the wood stove.



The utility area is one giant step closer to completion, now that the two huge hot water tanks have arrived (one of them alone weighs 850 lbs empty.) I'm guessing Robert the Plumber will be back, attaching ever more copper pipes to the ever diminishing wall space. Once the tanks are set up, these rooms can be completed - a bit more drywall, floor stain, plumbing and light fixtures.

And finally, Carl and Stoney have completed their work on the covered patio in front of the building. Once the temperature rises above freezing, Carl can return and complete

the stone façade of the Common Room. And we'll wait for spring for final landscaping (ie grass).

That's today's snapshot of the work on the lodge; more next week.

February 21, 2011



Weeks of frantic activity on the lodge, approaching an important deadline. On Saturday, Jim has to show some potential renters the new building. He opens the door and - "Surprise!" – 70 or so of his closest friends have come in honor of Jim's 60th birthday! Yes, he's turning 60, even though he remains spry as a cucumber.

It was an amazing audition for the building's scheduled debut in April. The blush-colored plaster walls of the Common Room created a warm atmosphere, thanks to the hard work of Carol Stenberg and Rick Davis. The locally-made Hubbardton Forge wall sconces cast a soft glow around the room, powered by gentle LED bulbs. Flickers of light played around the room from the fairy lights hung by – who else? – David Kirsch, the bubble and donut master.

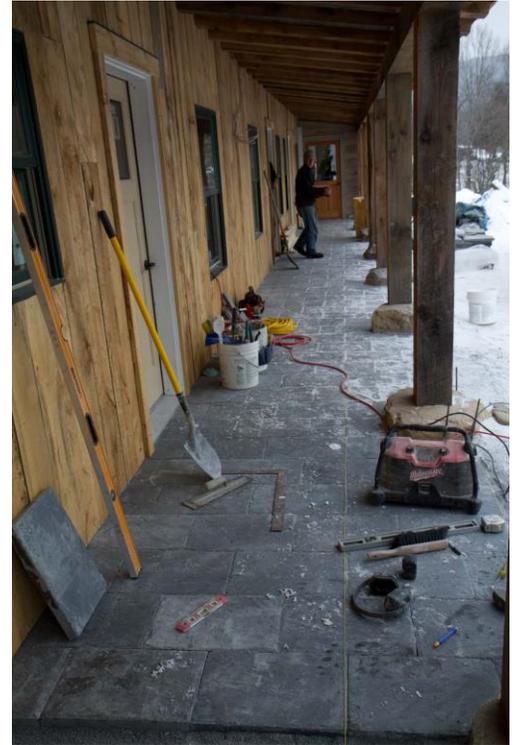
The kitchen had been installed – a fridge to cool the beverages was essential. On the Friday before the party, Jon Seeley had just finished the kitchen cabinets. The maple floors, the pine paneling, the oak counters, the waney window trim, the hemlock rafters – the room reflects the diversity of the nearby forest. In this warm and cozy setting, the partygoers erupted in laughter and friendship, dispelling thoughts of the frosty February night.

As the crowds thinned and people said their goodbyes, a few of us remained. We arranged the folding chairs as we would like to sit. First we sat near the wood stove, which is not yet installed – but must have given off a warm glow anyway. Then we moved to the window, looking out over the snow-covered field on a night made bright

by muted moonlight. In our moveable seats, we had unwittingly discovered where the sofas and comfy chairs will be when the building is completed.

Some of us stayed over – five of the rooms were occupied in all. The toilets and sinks work, although not the showers – the hot water is not yet hooked up. A few of us gathered in one of the bedrooms and roared with laughter at one silly joke after another. I was worried that we'd awaken the people trying to sleep next door. They never heard us.

I had just spent the better part of two weeks worrying about sound transmission between the rooms – you have no idea how many obscure issues you have to concern yourself with in construction. Barriers to sound come in several varieties. One is mass – the heavier the material, the more it blocks the transmission of sound waves. Sheetrock and plywood are the mass blocking sound from passing through the walls of the Lodge.



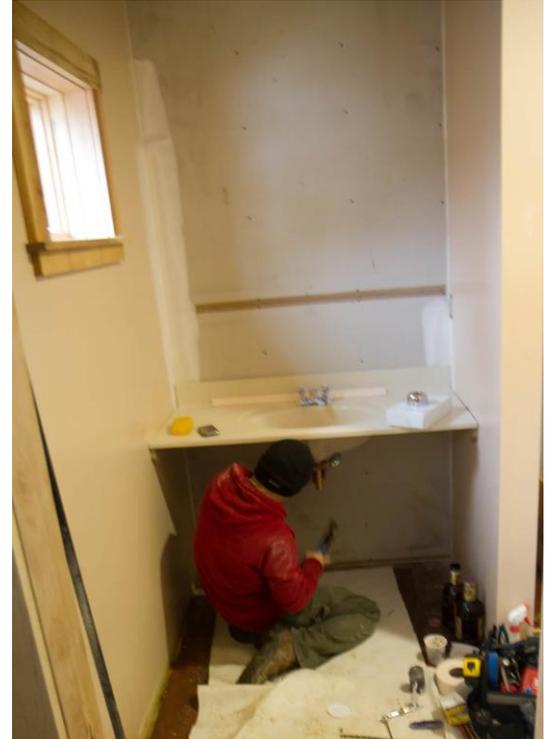
Another barrier to sound transmission is absorption, as sound waves are diverted through porous insulating materials. To this end, we've installed natural Rockwool insulation in the cavities between walls. Rockwool is a natural material made from rocks and minerals, heated to form a mass of very fine intertwined fibers; sound is absorbed by Rockwool's open fibrous structure.

One other way to attenuate sound is through distance – the larger the separation from the sound source, the weaker the sound.

Here's how we've used these basic principles in the design and construction of the Lodge. Some of the guestrooms are separated from each other by bathrooms; here we have greater distance between the rooms, and walls with the mass of sheetrock, the sound-absorbent Rockwool insulation and more sheetrock. Where two guestrooms are back-to-back (or adjoin the common room), we have double wall insulation – sheetrock, insulation, plywood, insulation, sheetrock. The dense polished concrete floors also keep the sound from travelling between the rooms.

But sound will find a way through any weak spot – the space around doors, electric outlets, openings around pipes, the tiny space between the walls and the floors or ceilings. So these need to be filled with an acoustic sealant, blocking the passage of sound through the open airspace. Sealant isn't always an option, so sound absorbing gaskets have been placed behind electric outlet covers, to make sure that noise doesn't pass through.

One other issue: sound waves can be transmitted by hard surfaces that touch, because of vibrations. So, the metal sprinkler pipes that go between rooms cannot be permitted to touch the sheetrock surrounding them. Instead, we've opened up some space between the pipes and the sheetrock, packed the space with Rockwool and applied an acoustic sealant around it.



So, yes, we've been on a crusade to stamp out sound! For the past two weeks, Carol, Kiesha, John Perkins and I have been talking to each other through the walls, to see if any sound penetrates. "Hi Carol, now I'm talking." "HEY, KIESHA, NOW I'M SCREAMING!" At long last, with caulk, gaskets, more sheetrock and Rockwool, I think we got it right.

Now that we are sure that the rooms are as sound-proof as is reasonable, we can open the floodgates of finish construction activity. More details about this next week.

March 28, 2011

Meet Malgosia, the artist and designer who is helping us furnish the Lodge. With her Polish accent, wry sense of humor, limitless energy and the ability to look well-appointed even in a pair of jeans, Malgosia inspires confidence! Sitting with her and Carol Stenberg in the Burlington Furniture Store, discussing the properties of various fabrics, coordinating colors and comparing prices, I felt relieved that I had called in the professionals to help us buy furniture and furnishings for the Lodge.



It's not as simple as you think – not just a matter of price comparison, like in the good old days before we began destroying our planet and its people. Okay, that is a bit over the top, but social, health and environmental concerns sure do make buying, say, bedding, a bit more complicated than I had envisioned.

Let's start with sheets. First, they have to fit the odd-sized beds and be easy to clean. But we also want them to be made of natural fiber, preferably organic, locally made if possible. Oh, and we want them to be affordable too.

I quickly learned that it would be difficult to satisfy all of our criteria. American cotton has largely disappeared, replaced by cotton grown in China and subsidized soybeans and corn grown here. Fabric and clothing used to be manufactured in the US – remember the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory? – but more and more of this work is now concentrated in Pakistan, India, China and Brazil. So buying locally can be an elusive goal - we might have to settle for “not made by children working in sweatshops.” We used a shorthand for this – not made in China.

While the “100% cotton” and “organic” claims are highlighted in the catalogues, the country of origin is a lot harder to research. And if the fabric is imported, who can be sure of the claims as to its content? How is organic material certified abroad? And with

lower import duties on fabrics identified as cotton, manufacturers have an incentive to exaggerate cotton content too.

Sometimes there are trade-offs – take, for example, removable “duvet covers” for our comforters. It’s more labor-intensive to remove and replace the covers for laundering, but it uses so much less water and electricity, it was the green thing to do.



Sometimes, there’s a conflict between using natural materials and health concerns. Wool is natural but some people find it itchy. Others are allergic to the down in comforters, but the non-down fill is hardly natural, and definitely not found on your average farm. “Hey, when you’re done milking the cow, can you please harvest the Permaloft © ?”

So, what’s a girl to do but call in the pros?

Malgosia seems to have a wide range of knowledge about fabrics, from her experience as an artist and interior designer, from visiting fabric mills as a young girl, and from hours of research. We tasked her with finding us linens that fit our complex grid of concerns – natural materials, organic if possible, not made with child labor under horrendous working conditions, and affordable. Malgosia set to work.

After hours of conversations and research, here is what we came up with:

- Fitted bottom sheets for our standard camp beds: made from American grown cotton flannel, manufactured by Inner Peace, a company based in Oregon
- All other sheets and pillow cases: organic cotton, manufactured in India to International Organic quality standards



- Polar Fleece blankets, from fleece manufactured from recycled bottles in Massachusetts, and made into blankets by the Vermont Fleece Co in Morrisville
- Comforters and pillows: filled with Primaloft, a hypoallergenic material produced in Wisconsin, with an Indian cotton covering
- Removable, washable covers for the comforters, made of organic cotton from India, grown to International Organic quality standards.
- Bath towels made from 100% cotton microfiber from India – the microfiber dries faster than other materials.

You should know that this whole process of choosing linens – discussions, research, agonizing over moral choices and pocketbook issues – seems to be the single most complex thing we've handled in the building, - except for the heating system.

I'll write another update soon, with more information on the building's progress (nearly done) and other purchasing decisions!

April 15, 2011

Tuesday was the long-awaited BIG DAY. When I arrived at the lodge, a tad late and breathless, I was greeted by a somber looking collection of men. Gathered together were the electrician, the sprinkler guys, the fire alarm guys, two state inspectors, the local fire chief, builder John Perkins, and Jim, the obligatory camp photographer. I looked around and spotted Carol Stenberg, our architect, a reassuring female presence (I thought I'd interrupted a CCG men's group, and was looking for Steve Blane). After some poking and prodding and lots of alarms going off, the verdict was in.

We passed! We got our electrical and fire and safety permits! Last week, our plumbing permit was granted. The week before, we got our wastewater permit. And the boiler inspector came later on Tuesday, approving our complex heating system. We have our five permits in hand and are open for business!

Not that everything is completely done yet – no, that would give me a chance to breathe (yes, I'm still breathless). But we're in the home stretch, and ready enough for our first rental this Friday. We've cleared out 4 bedrooms and the Common Room for the group. The beds are being assembled and the wood stove is being installed. Wendy, our neighbor and cleaning whiz, is going over the rooms, making the beds, making sure there is toilet paper and the like. Caretaker Pat as well as Wendy will set up the furniture in the Common Room, some of which is on site, and some of which will be delivered on Friday, a hair's breadth ahead of the unwary group of renters.

Even so, there's a bit more to do before the April 30 Grand Opening – “punch list” items for the builders, final grading and site work, installation of the hot water solar tubes on the roof, planting the living roof, and the construction of wardrobes for the rooms. So I'll still need the respirator. But we've come a long way in the past year, and we're inches from the finish line. So you'll need more updates, and I promise to furnish them.

April 30, 2011



On Saturday April 30, after days of record rain in the state of Vermont, the skies opened up and set the scene for our “Celebration of Sustainability: Innovative Ideas in Action.” Upon the completion of our new Eco-Lodge, Common Ground took the opportunity to invite the public to their site to view how much we've accomplished since our humble beginnings over 20 years ago. The event included speeches by Bill

McKibben, renowned author, environmentalist activist, and scholar at Middlebury College and David Blittersdorf, CEO and founder of green energy company AllEarth Renewables.

“Making sustainable choices has always been a part of our mission,” stated Jim Mendell, one of Common Ground’s founders. Peg Kamens, also a founder, added, “Our site needs to demonstrate our commitment to the environment. Through our green building practices, solar power, and low carbon footprint we set an example for the hundreds of families that attend our programs each year.”

Bill McKibben echoed these points during the dedication ceremony: “These solar panels will not only help heat the hot water of this place, but will also educate all of the people that come through here every year and show them that it’s entirely possible to be doing it, and remind them to be doing it, on their own places all over the world.” McKibben also shared what he learned on a recent research trip to China, “For 250 million Chinese, when they take a shower at night, the hot water is coming off the roof. Compared with this country where it’s well under a quarter of one percent of people who have solar hot water.” Common Ground hopes that by using green technology in our own site, we’re helping to change this disproportionate figure.

Over 200 people attended the grand opening event, pausing to admire and explore the new Eco-Lodge and it’s innovative design. The Common Room of the Eco-Lodge was filled with representatives from organizations involved in Common Ground’s development over the years. Vendors included Perkins/Smith (who built the Eco-Lodge), Colibri Architects (who designed the Eco-Lodge), Yestermorrow Design Build School, Lewis Creek Association, and even a table about non-violent communication.



Although the theme of the dedication ceremony, which reminded the public just how dire environmental issues are, was a sober one, the overall mood of the day was a celebratory one. Children took part in an interactive performance with the Association of Vermont Recyclers and brick oven pizza made on site with many local ingredients satisfied the crowd’s appetite. The sheer beauty of the Common Ground site, which is nestled between the Green and Hogback Mountains, bathed in sun and giving way to spring blossoms, allowed the crowd to remember what they’re fighting for as

environmentalists. A large percentage of the Common Ground site, 560 acres, was given over to the Vermont Land Trust so as to never be developed is cause enough for celebration.



Daivid Blittersdorf, local businessman and CEO of AllEarth Renewables, gave the crowd of mostly locals something to chew on, “Peak oil has happened and the nuclear disaster in Japan is bringing energy and how with live in the world front and center again. But I think Vermont will lead, and this [Common Ground’s site development] is an example of leading, the rest of the United States. We’re a tremendously small state; if we can’t do it here, can we do it anywhere?”

Common Ground believes we can do it as a state and a society. The event marked the achievement of a nonprofit that’s striven to keep environmental sustainability in its mission and has come at a pivotal time. “Though we do this work without a guarantee that we’ll triumph in the end, we do it in the spirit that it’s a worthwhile way to spend

one's life to make that fight," stated McKibben at the end of his speech, "And what a pleasure it is to fight side-by-side with you."

Common Ground Center has consciously chosen the greener path, often times over a simpler, less expensive one, to set an example that other citizens and organizations can follow throughout the country and the world. We can't wait to share the new addition to the facility with the many families that will attend Camp Common Ground this summer. "This site is a little piece of heaven to our campers and community members," says Carole Blane, the center's program director. "As new families join our community this summer to have fun with their kids, they'll get to see how possible it is to have a truly green vacation."

Thanks to all who helped make it a great day!

May 6, 2011



Join me for a minute in a walk on the red trail, just west of the pond. You won't need your boots today – not if you're still sitting at your computer.

Anyway, imagine yourself looking around an area of mixed growth – deciduous northern hardwood trees interspersed with evergreen softwoods. Here you'll find hemlock and white pine along with beech, red oak, maple and black birch. Call it an

area of good old Common Ground diversity.

It is from this area that we harvested wood to use for the new Lodge. Why use wood from our property? I can't say it's actually cheaper. You have to pay the forester, the logger, the mill. And if the wood is to be used for structural support, you have to call the guys from NELMA, who come all the way from Maine to assess whether the wood you've cut is strong enough to hold up the building.

There might have been some savings – we were able to luxuriate in our hardwood harvest, using expensive woods we are too stingy to purchase. And the thick timbers

used for the roof would have been extravagant to buy as well. You pay extra for wide boards and large timbers at the lumber yard, but pay less using your own wood, since you're charged for the number of cuts, not the size of the board.

Still, the decision wasn't about the money. It was about bringing the forest inside, so the woods that surround us are reflected in the wood on the walls. It was about using truly local resources – wood from our land, trucked only to nearby mills and back again, not cross country or across the oceans. It was about using building materials native to this area, just as past generations of Vermonters always have.

Knowing we were using wood from our land, our architect designed the building to take advantage of our harvest. Carol Stenberg's plan required large dimension timbers, some as big as 8"x10", and as long as 20'. These enormous "sticks" support the roof – you can see these exposed beams inside. The vast majority of these are hemlock, a stronger and more durable wood than pine.

And we had the wonderful problem of what to do with our stock of hardwood boards. The harvest from our forest produced several kinds of hardwood, mostly red maple, with black birch, beech and red oak thrown in. A wonderful embarrassment of riches.



To add interest to the building, we decided to sheath the Common Room exterior with kiln-dried boards, shaped into "novelty siding" (recognizable because each board has a scalloped edge). We applied a finish to protect these boards, and stained them a grey-brown, so they'd resemble weathered wood. Our hope is that the two sides of the building – unfinished rough boards and finished, stained novelty siding – will one day grow to look the same, like an old married couple.

Our original plan was to panel each of four rooms with a different species of hardwood, so you could easily see the distinctions in each type of wood. Maybe Jim would take a portrait of each kind of tree for each room, to drive the point home. We could have Jackie make a painting of the leaves. Maybe even interview the tree, looking for salacious confessions. Get a copy of its birth certificate, to make sure it is native to these parts.

But alas, our ambitious plans were thwarted. It is hard to tell the difference between the lighter sapwood of the birch, beech and maple, so the wood got mixed together at the mill and no one was the wiser. So if you look at the “maple” floor in the Common Room, you’ll see beech and birch mixed in with the maple, the lighter sapwood mixed in with darker heartwood. So it is definitely a floor with a lot of character, diversity and, therefore, beauty.

After we realized how many hardwoods had passed for maple, we decided to highlight the diversity as best we could. Take a look at the bathroom doors, made by Jon Seeley from scraps of left-over hardwood. You can see the different kinds of wood side by side, some darker heartwood, some lighter sapwood. Extra credit for any camper who can correctly identify which wood is which.

The one hardwood we harvested with a distinctive grain was the red oak. So we separated it out and put it all in one room, where it looks magnificent. We even used some of it for the kitchen counter.



One satisfying feature of using wood from our forest is the lack of uniform perfection in the boards. You’ll see gray streaks in the pine, squiggles and swirls in the hardwoods, and dense dark spots on some boards. Since irregularities were not culled or discarded, our harvest produced less waste. And the particular patterns in the visible wood tell a story about the life of the tree that produced it,

bringing the life of the surrounding forest into the built environment. I guess this story will have to pass for our interview.

The best place to inspect the wood is in the paneling or wainscoting in the guestrooms. Some of the wood shows signs of “spaulting”. This pattern of a dark ring border around an area of discolored wood indicates an area of bacterial infection in the tree – this part of the tree was diseased or dying. You might also see small black lines, documenting the one-time presence of the larvae of powder post beetles, which attack wood once it is compromised.

In some boards you’ll notice dark spots in the wood grain. These are signs of “inclusion.” We’re not talking important playground values here. Inclusion likely reveals a past injury to the tree; the dark spot is actually the tree’s bark. The injured wood behind the bark failed to grow, while the wood surrounding the injury continued to fill in. That’s why the bark is now imbedded in the sapwood.

Another interesting feature on some of the panels is a pattern identified as “curly maple.” The curly squiggles in the wood grain indicate that these boards came from the base of the tree. The weight of the tree caused the rings of the tree to compress into odd patterns. You will also see “curly birch” in some of the trim work.

Some of the north rooms in the Lodge are paneled in pine; some of this pine has a grey stripe on one edge. This stripe tells us something about the way the tree was harvested and made into lumber. In Vermont, logging occurs mostly in the winter, when the ground is frozen hard and the trees are dormant. Sap will begin to flow during the spring thaw, even in trees that have been cut into logs. These grey markings are in the sapwood, the portion of the tree just under the bark. They are a sign that bacteria was feasting on the sweet sap released in the spring, after the tree was felled.

So that’s the story of the wood in our Lodge and the surrounding woods at CGC. The building, we hope, will tell the story of the land surrounding it. And perhaps induce the

sense of wonder we all feel on a day like today, as the forest buds burst into new life, portending the magic of summer.

In full-on summer, all of these trees stretch their leaves towards the sun, competing for the light. Right now, the hardwoods are on top, dominating the forest canopy. But if enough sunlight can't seep through to the forest floor, the hemlocks will take over. Hardwood seedlings cannot grow in the dense shade created by the bushy hemlocks, which now await their turn in the sun, just below the mature hardwood trees.



July 6, 2011: The Final Chapter

We've had lots of "deadlines" for the Lodge's completion - Jim's birthday party, the Grand Opening, the start of our rental season. While we were able to successfully host these events, there were always a few more major tasks to complete – finishing the plastering, installing the solar tubes, finding the furnishings. There was always a long "to do" list remaining for the contractors and the office staff, so we couldn't really call it done.

I can finally say that we met the real final deadline for the Lodge's completion – Rental Coordinator Kiesha's wedding, which just happened over July 4th weekend. The level of activity noticeably picked up as everyone who works with Kiesha did that one extra thing to prepare for the wedding festivities. We wanted CGC to sparkle for Kiesha's family and friends.

And indeed, the Lodge was ready for Kiesha's big day. Kren, our garden guru, planted perennial beds around the Lodge to make it more welcoming. An accessible path



connects the Lodge to the dining hall and the bathhouse. No one else need have the white knuckle experience of gripping the arms of their wheelchair while their husband pushes it downhill (my unforgettable wheelchair moments). The solar tubes were up on the roof, heating the hot water for Kiesha's friends as they got ready for the celebration.

Most important, there was furniture. Maybe this sounds easy – go to Ikea, push your way through the crowds, wait on line with your cart stacked to the roof, find the parking lot and maybe your car - and vow to never shop again. We could have gone that route – but no. How can you create a building whose heart is local and recycled materials, and then shop at a Big Box store, even a loveable one? So we applied the same principles to our furniture shopping list that pertained to the whole process. Shop at locally-owned stores. Find stuff made from local or recycled materials. Patronize local artisans. At the very least, avoid sweat shop labor.

Looking for things through this filter, we were able to furnish the building in a satisfyingly idiosyncratic way – you won't find this stuff at the local Motel 6:

- The large tables in the Common Room – perfect for your laptop - were made by Starksboro resident Jon Seeley from wide planks of wood milled from our own trees.
- The hanging light fixtures were made by architect Carol Stenberg, from driftwood found near Lake Champlain.
- The bedroom side tables were made by Vermont Farm Table, based in Charlotte, from wood reclaimed from an old Vermont barn.
- The lamps on these tables were made from stones uncovered at the building site, by Green Stone Artisans, based in Stowe.



- The coffee and game tables in the Common Room were made from reclaimed fir planks by Rob Brewer, a Burlington-based carpenter.

When we couldn't get local and unique, we still aspired for local:

- The wall sconces in the dining hall were made by Hubbardton Forge, a local Vermont company.
- The sofas and many comfy chairs were purchased at Burlington Furniture, a locally owned store.
- Conant Metal and Light, a locally owned store in Burlington, supplied the outside light fixtures.
- Much of the hardware, including hinges and hooks, are from locally owned Closer to Home, located in South Burlington.

When we couldn't get local, we looked for items that had some redeeming social value:



- The chairs that surround the Common Room tables are available through Sitonit.com, and are Greenguard certified for low air quality emissions and partially made from recycled fibers; they were manufactured in California.
- The hammocks are fair trade certified, made in Brazil from recycled fibers and purchased at Gardener's Supply, a locally owned store.
- The baskets used for toilet paper, paper towels and trash were made in Ghana, are fair trade certified and were purchased from the locally owned Peace & Justice Store
- The shower curtains are made of hemp, which grows well without pesticides or herbicides, is a renewable resource, and is mildew and microbe resistant. We ordered some of these from California.

Sometimes, we had to just go with what we needed. We used the same beds in the guestrooms we have all over camp – they give us flexibility, because they can be stacked, separated or joined as Queen beds. We ordered them online, but they are made in Maryland – so not in sweatshops.

Okay, truth be told, we couldn't always be 100% conscientious in our purchases. We did avoid sweatshops, sure. But when we needed a few comfy chairs for the guestrooms, we couldn't find anything local, affordable or of the size we needed. So we jumped in the car, headed for Ikea, ate the Swedish meatballs, slogged through the warehouse, got lost in the parking lot – and vowed never to go shopping again.