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## The Architect's Tale

As a young design/builder engaged primarily in renovation projects, I realized that behind every stick and nail of a hand-built house lurks a story. A scrap of ancient newspaper in the rafters or a can of snuff found in the stud spaces; secret closets, oddly proportioned doors, even stairs to nowhere - these and other peculiarities had me imagining high drama with heroes and villains, tragedy and comedy. Why was the building there? Who had commissioned it? Who were the builders and what were their thoughts as they constructed it?

Older houses took longer to build originally than today's factory-made wonders. Over the course of construction, many things took place in the lives of the clients, the builders, and the community. Evidence of these events was often present in the building's design, sometimes even in its very fabric. Many of these older homes were the finest buildings I had ever come across. Later, as an architect, I reach the conclusion that great buildings usually have great stories behind them. If my clients don't come with a story, I urge them to create one.

### Storytelling

The Donoghues had a story. They arrived at my doorstep with the classic American tale of hard work leading to brilliant success. Starting with nothing, Kevin Donoghue had worked his way to the top of the insurance industry. As a young agent he had borrowed heavily to buy a small, kit-built ski cottage in Warren, VT for his skiing spouse Ellen. Twenty years and four kids later, they were ready for a complete architectural makeover.

We integrated the low-lying kit house with an addition that stood up tall and proud. In every aspect of the renovation we reflected on the Donoghues' character and story: that of a hardworking family who loves games and sports. The work ethic has been rewarded with a penthouse master suite that lords over the entire valley. A game/billiards room on the first floor opens out onto a patio with a hot tub. We also added a sauna, a steam bath and double shower, and a sports-equipment storage room. Regardless of who lives here in the future, the house will always resonate with the three generations of hardworking, hard-playing Donoghues that had it built.

## **Poetic License**

The Whinstons were younger. Though they wanted to live in an old farmhouse, they were building new, on the edge of a beautiful Vermont meadow. They needed a story.

We imagined their meadow to be the last few acres of a family farm, which still included a house, barn, and silo. In our story, as tourism grew and making a living on the farm became harder, the family's sons left the valley. To make ends meet, the grandparents sold off bits of land until this parcel was all that remained. When they died it was left to the grandchildren, who used the house as a ski shack, crudely connecting it to the barn to maximize sleeping capacity.

Our saga continued with the grandchildren deciding to sell and the Whinstons moving in. Recognizing the fundamentally good qualities that lay under generations of bad decisions, they decided to renovate.

As the first non farmers to work the place, their contribution was clear and bright. They added a contemporary kitchen to the end of the barn and used the rest of that soaring space to showcase their collection of sculpture and art. The use of radiant-heat floors gave the impression the farmhouse was still heated primarily by the central Rumford fireplace. Exterior walls that were not totally square created interesting spaces in conjunction with “new” interior walls. Salvaged doors and windows housed in new jams set up contrasts between new and old. The long decline of the property had been reversed; a new chapter in the story began.

## **Personal History**

I must add the story of my own first house. It was a run-down, 1830s Cape with an attached barn rotted out at the sills. Underneath the decay, I found an incredible jewel box of a timber-framed farmhouse. The barn was another story. It had been built hastily and then abused by several bad renovations. The entire building was clearly owner-built. I decided to restore the Cape to its historic look and renovate the barn in keeping with my 1980s solar sentiments.

The house's structure gave me insight into the original farmer and his family. Clearly this was a patient man – and a strong one. Despite short building seasons and a lack of power tools, he had crafted a full-height basement from large stones. The frame featured excellent joinery and hand-hewn beams over 30 feet long. The windows were well-crafted and much of the glass was original. This was a family of moderate means, but they wisely invested in high-quality materials.

I tried to reveal who I was and what my building values were with the renovation of the barn. Although I used modern materials like concrete, plywood, dimensional wood, and Plexiglas, I tried to do so with the same level of craftsmanship as the original owner/builder. I added an attached greenhouse with an integral gray-water system, passive solar storage, and deep-bed planters. The barn and house sit side-by-side, an architectural “conversation” between two owner/builders separated by a century and a half.

The stories buried within buildings are fascinating. Some represent real archaeology, some local history, and all human drama. When we think of a structure as merely an object, we miss the stories and personalities of those who made it. Architecture is the art of designing buildings, but it's also a form of storytelling – and a good story outlasts even bricks and mortar.

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