



Award Winning Craftsmanship | Stowe, Vermont

# the craftsman

A NEWSLETTER OF SISLER BUILDERS FALL | WINTER 2009



The remodeled Puddicombe residence blanketed in Vermont's white gold.

## NEW HOME | NEW LIVES

BY DAVID GOODMAN

Barbara Puddicombe was tired of being a weekend warrior. Since 1975, she and her husband Michael had been making weekend trips from their home in Rhode Island to ski at Stowe. "We just piled into houses with other people when we were in our mid-20s," she recalls with a fond grin. "Three kids and a dog later, we were still coming here every weekend. Then weekends grew into summer vacations, because we found Stowe even more beautiful in summer than winter."

Ten years ago, the Puddicombes decided that their days doing laps between Rhode Island and Stowe were over. Michael traded in his job as a professor of business at Boston University for one at Norwich University in Vermont, and Barbara transitioned from her Rhode Island practice as an occupational therapist. "Our five-year plan to move to Vermont suddenly turned into a five-month plan," says Barbara with a chuckle. Then came the big challenge: finding a house.

One day, Michael called his wife with a strange announcement, "You're not gonna be happy with this house." He was only partly right. The 25-year old post-and-beam cape "didn't have a lot of curbside appeal, but it was very functional," says Barbara. But when she looked out from the back porch, she saw a view framed by the Worcester Range on one side and Camel's Hump on the other. "This is it," she declared. She points out her window to the multicolored waves rising up to meet the sky. "I felt that I was being cradled in these mountains."

Perched high on Stowe Hollow at the foot of the Worcester Range, the Puddicombes turned to builder Steve Sisler to help transform their 1970s-era

*I'm Steve Sisler. I founded Sisler Builders in 1983, and have been building and remodeling award-winning homes and buildings in the Stowe area ever since. I like to think we do more than build houses. We help bring people's dreams to life. The dream of living in Vermont, playing in the outdoors, and having a home that's in harmony with our beautiful landscape. Like my clients, when I'm not working, I can usually be found enjoying Vermont's outdoors in various ways.*

*This newsletter is our way of sharing with you some of the dreams we've helped bring to life, and how we do it. Be inspired. Enjoy. And let us know what you think.*



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house – and by extension, their lives. They wanted a contemporary but rustic Vermont home for their active family of five. Today, Gretchen, 18, is a high school senior, aspiring artist and avid soccer player, and Sam, 13, is an eighth grader at Stowe Middle School, who loves backcountry skiing and cross-country running; their oldest son Matthew is now in engineering school in California.

We enter the house through a spacious mud room that opens onto a fieldstone patio. Bike helmets hang from a pole and running shoes and hik-

*cont. p.3*

# BUILDING GREEN: A LIFETIME PASSION

BY STEVE SISLER

I've been glad to see that the concept of "building green" has become popular in the last few years. It's an affirmation of ideas and principles that I've held for much of my life. And it's a theme that has been in my consciousness – and is reflected in all of our buildings – since I started Sisler Builders in 1983.

I trace my passion for "resource-efficient building" (what others now call "green building") back several generations in my family. My paternal grandparents struggled through the Great Depression. I remember my visits to their farmstead, where I saw up close many examples of their frugality and the efficient way they used materials. There were the afternoons I spent straightening nails with my Gramma, so that Grampa could fix something without going to the store. I saw how they heated only sections of their house so that they were cozy, but they wanted to minimize the amount of wood that needed to be cut, split, and hauled into the house, and then removed as ashes. I also noticed how they appreciated simple artistic details in the things they made, such as the clean straight lines of their handmade kitchen table. What was a necessity for them grew into a philosophy for me.

When I was 14, I started working on a real construction crew. That's where I learned about craftsmanship. We were doing a renovation of a historic building, The Clinton House. During lunch the conversation would often turn to how much meticulous hand work had gone into building this large hotel. Beams had been hand hewn, intricate column capitals had been hand-carved, and compound angles on fascia molding had been hand-cut. The carpenters I worked with marvelled at how the "old timers" really must have placed importance on doing things right the first time. For the original craftsmen, retracing steps didn't mean just going to the store to buy another beam. It meant sending someone out to the forest to cut, square and size a new beam, probably resulting in an unwelcome slowdown in the construction schedule. The artistry and efficiency of the previous generation of craftsmen had an unspoken but profound influence on all of us. I noted the pride the carpen-

ters on my crew felt when they made a perfect cut on the first try. These observations and realizations made a lasting impression on me.

In 1973, the oil embargo spiked the price of gas. Suddenly, people cared about fuel efficiency. I was lucky to be affiliated with a builder who was very interested in building homes that utilized the power of the sun in order to minimize use of fossil fuels for heating. These building practices were cutting edge for the time. He designed homes with large expanses of glass on the south side and a masonry

floor that would absorb the sunlight during the day and release the absorbed heat during the evening. We installed insulation all around the foundation to make the whole earthen area under the home a heat sink. The insulation and air barrier was carefully installed to make sure there was no excessive air leakage. A few years later, I lived in one of the homes we had built. We lived very comfortably all through the winter, only having

a wood fire on cloudy days. I was impressed. And I was proud of the work I had done.

My family has lived in a passive solar home that I designed and built in 1984. In 1987, we added solar panels to provide domestic hot water so that we could reduce our consumption of propane. My home is constructed of wood that was cut and milled in northern Vermont. I also used some beautiful American chestnut that I salvaged from a burned building on my property. It felt good to give new life to an old building. It also made sense to use the water, septic and power that were already in place. An added bonus (well, a necessity when I was in my twenties) is that my home was inexpensive to build and heat due to careful material sourcing and attention to building details.

I take pride in applying these time-tested resource-efficient principles to all of our building projects. Other folks can call what I do "green building." But I hold myself to a higher standard. I strive to ensure that every building I create would get a nod of approval from my frugal, sensible, creative grandfather were he around today. **[sb]**



Atop his first construction project is Steve at age 16. This historic preservation project was under the direction of Sisler's mother.





Windows highlight the remodeled family room.

*New Home cont. from p.1*


ing boots litter the floor. The cramped original post-and-beam frame has been seamlessly integrated into an airy family room and kitchen. Light pours in through large windows that wrap around two corners of the house. On this morning, Gretchen sits at the kitchen counter tapping on her laptop, while Sam bumps around the kitchen getting breakfast. Lots of glass, exposed wood beams, richly colored granite counters and a ruggedly elegant stone fireplace create a warm, earthy space for the family to hang out.

The Puddicombe home is an extension of a life that is intimately connected to the outdoors. That was the dream Barbara and Michael were chasing when they moved to Vermont. From the windows that face out onto rocky mountain ridges to the skis in the garage, the dream has become a reality.

"Vermont has been everything I wanted it to be," says Barbara, a contented smile spreading across her tanned, youthful face. "This has been a

time and place when I could just bring up my kids living outdoors." She has maintained a busy private practice of hand therapy out of her home office, but she also relishes the days she spends as a volunteer in her kids' schools. "I don't think my kids remember when I was not engaged in their lives, which is just what I wanted." She adds with a twinkle, "I also get plenty of time on the ski slopes."

Barbara recently celebrated a milestone with some local flare. "I decided for my fiftieth birthday that I would do 50 things I had never done before. I started by skiing the Stowe Derby [my goal was to not finish last] and I finished by running the Stowe 8 Miler." Along the way she also made her first descent of some of Stowe's classic tree skiing runs, had her first shot of tequila, and went cliff jumping.

Barbara strolls outside past the red barn garage onto the stone patio. "I feel like I'm the luckiest person," she says with a soft smile. A light breeze flutters the autumn foliage in the yard. "I just live in the most beautiful place in the whole entire world. I feel such an affinity to the topography here. It's a landscape that is constantly changing. No matter how many times you hike or ski it, it continues to offer you new challenges, or it doesn't have to be challenging at all. Vermont just takes care of my emotional soul." She sweeps her arms out, as if embracing the trees and air around her. "There is no place else that I have ever found like it." 

## IN THE NEWS

Watch out this winter for Vermont Magazine featuring a Sisler Builders project.  
Richard Duda is a Certified Green Professional.  
Scott Cunningham is a Certified Graduate Builder.  
Richard Duda & Matt Rouleau attended an Interior Air Quality Conference.  
Congrats to Scott Langlois' new baby girl.  
Check out our new website  
[www.SislerBuilders.com](http://www.SislerBuilders.com)

# ? ASK SISLER BUILDERS

**Q: What are your thoughts on indoor air quality?**

**SB:** As building envelope integrity improves, the flow of fresh air is intentionally reduced. We have found that an energy recovery ventilator (ERV) is the best solution to this problem. An ERV provides fresh air to your house while recovering energy. An ERV is a fan that brings in outdoor air and tempers it with indoor air that it is being exhausted. An ERV can keep up to 80 percent of the energy in exhausted air inside a house while still providing fresh air.

**Q: Should we consider installing solar panels when building a new house?**

**SB:** There are many benefits to harnessing solar power: reducing your carbon footprint, utilizing clean power, and hedging against future electricity price increases. We recommend that you have an analysis done by a qualified professional who can explain your up-front costs, the federal and state credits, and the amount of energy you can expect to get out of it.

**Q: What do you think about using passive solar on a renovation or new house?**

**SB:** We strongly encourage the use of passive solar designs. Buildings designed for passive solar incorporate large south-facing windows, and use building materials that absorb and slowly release the sun's heat. Passive solar design also incorporates additional window glazing, added thermal mass, larger roof overhangs, and other shading features. The result is increased comfort and substantially decreased heating bills.

## MY FAVORITE RIDE

BY BRIAN REILLY  
carpenter



### *I love riding the hills of Vermont.*


*The landscape is defined in part by its hills. Town and East Hill. Bliss Hill. Cole and French Hill. West, Percy and Weeks Hill. Dewey, Barnes, Guild and Gregg Hill. Blush and Perry. Each hill uniquely gratifying.*

*I know it's different for everybody. Some riders swoop back and forth up the hill slalom style, lengthening yet easing the pitch. Some will sit and spin. Others stand and crank out a taller gear. I've seen riders smiling as they climb...that must have been Bliss Hill. Most seem to be consumed with the process, one revolution at a time, with the "OMG! I still can't see the top" expression planted on their face. What I love to witness is the apparent effortless climb. Fluid and graceful. Operating com-*

*fortably below max heart rate. No wasteful motion, cadence consistent, entire body engaged and present.*

*The beauty of these hills is that they offer such a different experience from top to bottom. Traffic eases and viewsheds unfold. Pavement ends, the dirt road begins. Wildflowers and berries replace driveways and sidewalks. Pasture land and livestock become more common. Creeks and streams flow alongside. At times, the temperature slightly varies -- the fog bank in the valley that you rode through is still there, but now you are above it, in the sun. It seems as though a quieter more manageable life exists at the top. One where simpler needs are more valued.*

*I had this experience a few weeks ago. I was riding from West Hill Rd. to Sterling Valley Gorge for a swim. It was on a Saturday morning. That night was typical of the weather we'd been having this summer -- rainy. But, that morning there was no precip. I pedaled out of my drive-*

*way onto West Hill. Turned right at the T, passed the sculpture garden on my left, the solar panels and goats on my right. Then the open field with wet grass and no cows. Percy's sugarhouse came and went, then Maple Run passed by at 20 mph. Moran Loop went by a little faster. At the bottom, I crossed the bridge over Sterling Brook and took a sharp left onto Sterling Valley Rd. Then began the climb up to the gorge. It was on that really steep pitch, between Bull Moose Ridge Rd. and the cemetery that I realized how unique this ride was. I realized, as I was staring down at my front tire, while trying to weight my rear wheel to keep it from slipping, that last night's rain had completely erased all imprints on the road. There were no other tire tracks! It was fresh, a blank canvas. Besides the deer tracks that I found myself pedaling alongside, my tires were the only other imprints on the road. It was then that I found myself smiling. Completely happy, aware and grateful for my health, my home and this hill. *

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