

THE BUSINESS OF BUILDING: WOGANWORKS AND ATLANTIC CUSTOM HOMES

By Ross Rice

One of the hardest hit industries during this moribund economy has to be home building and restoration. According to the U.S. Commerce Department, starts of new single-family homes have declined 5.3 percent to a seasonally adjusted rate of 647,000 units in June, the slowest pace in seventeen years. Much needed help from the Bush Administration and Congress in the form of a housing stimulus package has yet to materialize, and basic building material costs steadily rise—some items up 40% just this last month—thanks in a large part to gas/petroleum prices. Designers and builders have to get more creative to buck the downside of this cycle, and continue to contribute to the creation and restoration of Hudson Valley architecture, while keeping local carpenters and contractors employed.

We spoke to some interesting folks in the business on both sides of the Hudson to get a sense of what's happening, and how they are managing to stay in the game in spite of the odds.



WOGANWORKS, KINGSTON

Robert Wogan would have laughed out loud. Only, he was underwater. Here he was fully submerged with a taped-up cordless drill, assembling a movie set for NYC art film auteur/large-scale sculptor Matthew Barney. As a lifelong Manhattan resident and Columbia graduate, Robert was putting his sculpture degree to good use as house problem solver to Barney, one of the art world's top up-and-coming stars best known for his *Cremaster Cycle*, and his partnership with the enigmatic singer/artist Björk. Robert had pretty much a dream gig: hefty budgets, sky's-the-limit ideas to create, new disciplines to absorb and quickly master. Though the water was chilly and the drills didn't work for long, it was good, if soggy, times.

But Robert was still wanting to make his own mark in sculpture, and was enticed away from Barney by a new gig that also played to his multiple skill set: working with interior design firm Rockwell Group

on a four-year contract at the Mohegan Sun Casino in Connecticut. As he describes it, "It was all dream-based. I got a lot of experience building between the artist and commercial side...what couldn't you build? It was all fantasy." Part of the job included building a full replica of a Native American long house, working with big budgets, union workers, and casino bosses, and dealing with rigorous codes for large public spaces. Pay was good, and Robert's general contractor skills were developing daily almost by default. But having moved from the city to the Hudson Valley in 1998 to start a family, the constant commute back and forth to Connecticut took its toll, and Robert decided to focus more on his own contracting business, taking mostly build-out and small contract jobs, while securing grants for large-scale lighting installations in Milwaukee and Philadelphia, using computer-programmed LED's.

But a lucky break occurred. Curator David Thorpe had met Robert during his time with Barney, and was impressed enough with Robert's ability and vision to include him in the 2002 Sculpture Biennial in Liverpool UK. His work centered around a short movie, shot on infrared, of his exploration of the interior of an abandoned ship in Philadelphia he had done an exterior lighting installation for the *SS United States*. The final movie, titled *Below*, was then presented in a darkened room in the middle of a maze of 8' high metal sheets...one way in, one way out. "I like working with abandoned spaces, (using light to) bring out things that have been abandoned...what makes something obsolete and left to just die?" Though well received, it unfortunately wasn't enough to kick his artist career into a higher gear.

Robert returned to home and family with a renewed sense of purpose: to get his home building/restoration business on solid footing. "There are (proper) ways to build things, and most home-builders know those ways. I come from the other side, it's like well, there is no 'way', it's whatever we can figure out." His knack for problem-solving and lateral thinking has come in handy in his restoration jobs: the 300 year-old Marbletown stone house he and his family are currently residing in required him to redo the plumbing and electrical...without damaging the walls. Several projects have required Robert to actually replace the foundation slabs underneath, no small feats. Two of them were barns.

One recent project that Robert just finished still has him enthused. The client had an old hunting cabin in Saugerties he wanted restored—foundation problems again, new radiant floor to install—but with a twist. After the cabin was wrapped in Tyvar™ (home wrap allowing moisture out, not in), the client requested a floating "curtain" exterior wall made out of long planks of Trex™—super-tough floor decking made from recycled plastic and binders—set 1/8" apart. The effect is similar to the childhood favorite Lincoln Logs, and the exterior requires zero maintenance.

Though not all clients request it, Robert is up to speed with modern green-building needs, having established relationships with local

companies like Green Courage in New Paltz as well as local solar/geothermal providers. It's not always an easy sell, as it requires more investment on the front end to realize later economic and ecologic benefits, resulting in higher bids. People do seem to expect there to be great deals during the housing slump, despite the rising cost of gas and materials, and less-scrupulous builders tend to underbid projects and then crank the costs back up once underway. As his past clients (see their testimonials at www.woganworks.com) attest, Robert and his top-notch crew get the job done, be it a basic barn foundation....or, Robert hopes someday, "something crazy, like a replica of the Korova Milk Bar from *A Clockwork Orange*."

(Visit www.woganworks.com for more about Robert's work, or call him at 845.331.WOGAN)

ATLANTIC CUSTOM HOMES, COLD SPRING

It doesn't get more "Horatio Alger" than the story of Lindal Cedar Homes founder, Sir Walter Lindal. Born to Icelandic immigrants in 1919 (not to royalty; the name "Sir" is an anglicized version of the name "Sculi"), and raised in a Canadian orphanage, Lindal volunteered to fight for Canada in World War II. He made his military mark by redesigning the .30-caliber machine guns to a lighter, more efficient .25-caliber gun, becoming a captain for his efforts.

Observing the efficient production of pre-fabricated buildings during wartime, gave him a great idea to pursue once the war was over in 1945: pre-cut and manufactured dwellings for cash-poor GI's to realize their dreams of home ownership. Looks weren't a high priority; the first package Lindal made available cost \$195, and his company also worked out loans and contractor arrangements. Cedar was plentiful in British Columbia, and of a high quality. Though the business had some problems in its initial hometown of Toronto, it finally caught on in the cottage and country home industry, finally basing in the more cedar-y Seattle.

Lindal Cedar Homes is now the world's largest manufacturer of custom cedar houses, with over 150 independent dealers in the US, Canada, and Japan. Their signature prow-shaped high-glass post-and-beam design has been very popular over the years, with over 50,000 homes built in a timeless style that shouts: Dream Home In the Country.

Greg and Jan Buhler, like many others, were dreaming of that home. As a 30-year aviation attorney for the law firm Schnader Harrison, Greg had his work (investigating crash sites), hit a bit too close to home when the jets flew into the Twin Towers on 9/11...directly across from his office.

Suddenly, even their home in Westchester seemed too close to danger, and the Buhlers started looking upstate, and found land with a Hudson River view. When they came across local Lindal dealer, Jim Johnston, they were impressed that Johnston was able to translate their pencil-on-graph paper ideas into a reality, "a house that does justice to the property". They had such a great experience with the Lindal system that when Johnston decided to retire three years

ago, the Buhlers bought him out in 2006. Greg was getting tired of the NYC commute, and both he and Jan welcomed the lifestyle change.

The new job was "...very creative and satisfying. When you're a lawyer, it's very impersonal. You're dealing with 150-page documents, everyone's arguing over the placement of a comma, inconsequential stuff. Here, we're involved with people. Next to having a child or marrying one off, the most emotionally involved people usually ever get is building a house. It's gut-wrenching, it involves the intellectual side, the creative side." Business has been pretty decent lately despite the housing slump, with three deliveries in the last two weeks alone. Since material costs are on the rise, folks seem to be getting in before prices get too much higher.



It's an interesting concept, the Lindal system. After purchasing the land and contacting the dealer, the client has several books filled with sample floor plans, many of which have been successfully built. The dealer helps with design modifications, using Lindal's proprietary computer engineering program. Once the land has been inspected, plans finalized, and money secured in escrow accounts, materials are ordered from the home office. (Lindal reports to have a fully sustainable reforestation program.) Everything is pre-cut and sized, packed into a piggyback container, shipped by rail, and eventually trucked onto the site. The dealer has a list of general contractors and builders familiar with Lindal construction (clients are welcome to choose their own, however), and helps shepherd the process along, making sure local permits and codes are addressed. For those unable to afford the full custom job, smaller pre-built modular houses are

available, ranging from \$110,000 to \$170,000.

Where do the savings come from this system, we ask? First, Lindal generally eliminates the need for an architect, whose charges can add up to 15 to 18% of the cost. With all items pre-cut, there's less overage and waste, and no contractor mark-up for materials, not to mention less of what the Buhlers refer to as "windshield time"... those inevitable multiple trips to the local hardware store.

Materials also come with a lifetime structural warranty. Most starting designs are passive solar, with a high degree of window space and the natural insulation quality of cedar. Heat radiant floors are recommended, and geothermal installations more feasible when building from the ground up. Total estimate for an average project, from start to "turnkey," with trim, paint, and appliances comes out around \$175-\$225 per square foot—a price that can be hard to beat for a dream house.

(Anybody interested in learning more about Atlantic Custom Homes and Lindal Cedar Homes should visit the display model Open House at 2785 Rte.9, Cold Spring, 9/29-30, 10 AM-5 PM. Contact the Buhlers at 888.558.2636 or 845.265.2636, or visit the website at www.lindalny.com.)