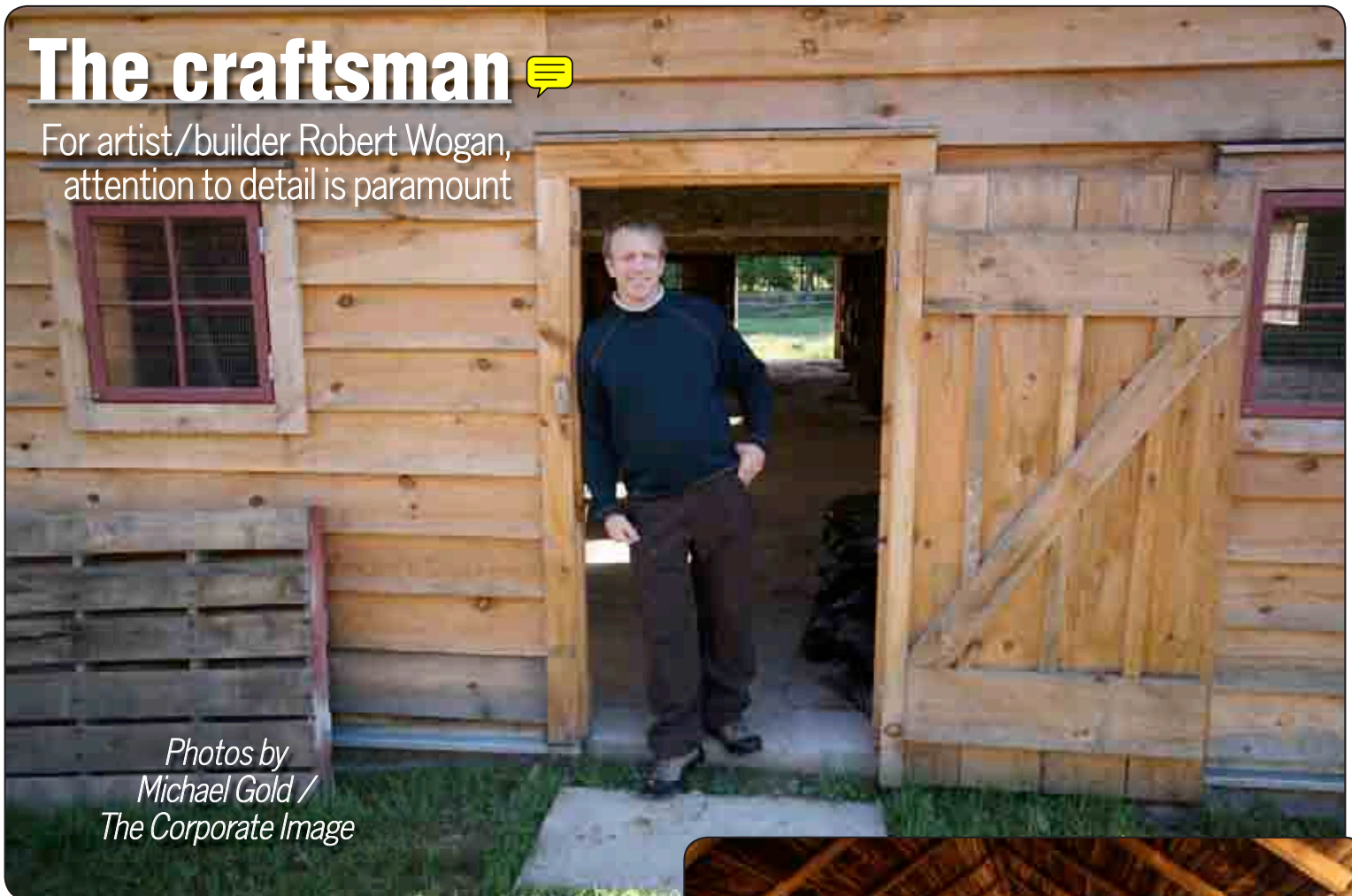


The craftsman

For artist/builder Robert Wogan, attention to detail is paramount



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ROBERT WOGAN IN THE DOORWAY OF THE 19TH CENTURY BARN HE RENOVATED IN NEW PALTZ.

By Sigrid Heath

Robert Wogan meets me outside the big red barn across the road from the stone house in Stone Ridge, where he lives with his wife and three young children. He sits me down and shows me a slide show on his computer that includes renovations on a 19th century New Paltz barn; detailed shots of the work he and his crew have done on the stone house; the eerily lit smoke stacks of a derelict ocean liner from his Web site (www.wogan.com); a pyramidal installation one enters to feel — voluntarily, mind you — claustrophobic; and a turn-of-the-century Milwaukee bank building (now housing the Milwaukee Historical Society) lit from within, the colors reflecting on the snow, the whole scene looking like a vintage hand-painted photo. Of the ocean liner's smoke stacks, he says, "She was a symbol of American technology and the fastest ocean liner ever built, but was taken out of service at the end of the 60s. On July 4, 1999, I lit her stacks for the first time in over 30 years."

Given such a disparate array of endeavors and having been led to believe he is a contractor/builder, it seemed appropriate to ask him what it is exactly that he does.

"What do I do?"

Yes.

"What *don't* I do!"

No single phrase neatly explains Robert Wogan's work life. "Renaissance man" comes close but it's still not quite right. He says, "I'll do anything specialized."

Wogan is drawn to work that will teach him something new, that involves a satisfying intellectual exchange with the involved parties, that provides an interesting experience for his crew, that presents problems whose solution requires a Zen-like attention to detail, and that allows him the opportunity to do something as well as it can possibly be done.



A VIEW OF THE BARN'S SECOND FLOOR.

His curriculum vitae offers clues to his eclecticism. He studied sculpture at Columbia and taught welding. He designed and fabricated sets for Matthew Barney Studios in New York, creating pieces that were central to the popular *Cremaster* series (five cult films produced by Barney between 1994 and 2002), and traveled extensively in Europe, Asia and this country overseeing art installations in galleries and museums.

For MJM Studios of NY, Inc., he directed the design team that renovated Mohegan Sun's retail shopping corridor



WOGAN AND HIS CREW BROUGHT THE BARN INTO COMPLIANCE WITH EXISTING BUILDING CODES.

and produced 32 panels of hand-strung crystal beads for the casino, working with engineers and designers “to ensure structural integrity, durability and cost control.”

In 2002, he started his own company, Wogan Works. His CV states that they concentrate on “custom design and building services focusing on the renovation of historic properties in the Hudson Valley, luxury residences in New York City, and unique projects requiring creativity and craftsmanship in the face of technical design and construction challenges.”

He lists as a Wogan Works project the New Paltz barn — bringing a 19th century structure into compliance with current codes while maintaining the integrity and beauty of the gambrel-roofed original. And he also lists the ongoing management of renovations on the stone house he lives in

with his family.

He has assembled a four-man crew that he speaks of with respect and affection.

“I know these guys will give the work 100 percent of their attention,” says Wogan, “and I take care of them. I pay on time.” He





WOGAN'S WORK ON THE CLASSIC STONE DUTCH COLONIAL IN STONE RIDGE, WHERE HE LIVES WITH HIS FAMILY, INCLUDED THE ADDITION OF A PORCH THAT CAN BE REMOVED AT ANY TIME WITHOUT DAMAGE TO THE HOUSE.

says he's "fortunate in the level of expertise" among the crew members, "and the ethic — it's a small, tight team, we all help one another. We all care, it's a harmonious group." They've worked together for about two years and can expand to meet the needs of a specific job.

Wogan elaborates on the ethic that drives the approach to every job he takes on. It starts with the initial conversations: "I listen to people," he says, "and try to understand what they want." It's a simple sentence, but speaking with Wogan, one quickly realizes how critical this part of the process is to him. As much as he can, he tries to slip under the skin of the individual he's working for, get to know how that person thinks, what he or she cares about. Then Wogan makes those needs his own and figures out the best way to realize them. "My job is to make it happen," he says.

So with Wogan, the issue is less *what* he does, than *how* it's done.

"There's one way to do a thing, and that's to do it as well as you can possibly do it," he says, "If that's not what you want, then I'm not the one for your project." He brooks no compromise. And he's found that people are willing to pay for that kind of professional rigor.

He also has solid praise for his regular

sub-contractors, Country Home Builders, "for timber framing — craftsmen of all things wood"; Angelica's, "for fine painting" (he buys European paints, which are richer in pigment than American products); and Brian Sheldon, who does stone work.

"Collectively, we have a lot of knowledge," says Wogan. "If I don't know the answer to a problem, I find out who does. My ego doesn't prevent me from asking the advice of experts."

The house is a classic stone Dutch colonial, with economy of form lending a homey elegance. The earliest date Wogan has come across for the original is 1690. "Makes you wonder what these stones have seen," he says.

His wife, Christina, moved in about ten years ago and Wogan joined her a couple of years later. His three children, two girls, seven and three, and a boy, two years old, were born in the house. The owner is Norwegian, a professor at Columbia who spends all his time in the City. "He said it reminded him of houses near his home," says Wogan. Before Christina, the owner had rented the house to a succession of people with little feeling for it and the structure was in a sad state of disrepair.

When Wogan first discussed a renovation plan with the owner, it was minimal,

a three-month project. "But it's been extended to 13," he says, "and we're finally getting close."

They walk around to the back and up a few steps to a new porch running the width of the house. It's built of ipê, a particularly dense and strong South/Central American hardwood that's not treated with toxic chemicals and is harvested using sustainable methods.

"We didn't want to bolt the porch into the stone," says Wogan, noting it was important to maintain the integrity of the original. So they buried concrete footings on which to mount the structure, only bolting it to the house at the eaves. The oil tank is on a slab under the porch. "The oil tank, propane and the electrical lines are all hidden," he points out.

A Dutch door, open at the top, leads to the central hallway. The floorboards are wide, smooth as satin, and as in many old houses, the cracks between are also rather wide. Wogan says he filled them with caulking but it's impossible to see. Every window has a ledge — a window seat, in some places — because the walls are about two feet thick. The warren of tiny rooms, typical of houses of this era, has been opened up by taking down a couple of walls. The palette of celadon greens,



WOGAN DIDN'T WANT TO BOLT THE PORCH INTO THE STONE TO RETAIN THE HOUSE'S INTEGRITY SO HE BURIED CONCRETE FOOTINGS ON WHICH TO MOUNT THE STRUCTURE, BOLTING THE PORCH AT THE EAVES ONLY.

creams, and slate blues is the result of research and preference. The larger rooms and cool colors notwithstanding, entering the house has the feeling of accepting an embrace. The house seems pleased to have people in it

Walking into the oldest room, one of the

two flanking the center hallway, the strong sense that this house is sentient gives me chills. I mention it, feeling slightly idiotic, but Wogan and his wife aren't surprised. "Houses have souls," says Christina. A huge hearth graces the room, which might have been the entire house when it was

first built. You can see where the hook was that once held the heavy pots for cooking.

The bedrooms are upstairs and the kitchen, downstairs. The kitchen is an impressive meld of old, beautiful bones and state-of-the-art equipment for cooking and doing all the other things necessary to run a busy modern household.

Following the bones underground, Wogan and his crew had to solve a chronic moisture problem by creating a culvert to divert subterranean runoff into the stream out back. Some rotten wood had to be replaced. There were a number of places where distressed wood had to be buttressed or replaced. "Every time we addressed one thing, we found a host of other things that needed work," he says.

Outside again, Wogan points to a place on the eaves where new construction meets the original structure. The join is seamless. The entire process has been one of digging far beneath the surface of the problem, making corrections, then correcting everything that is affected by that change, and finally, lovingly, covering the effort and making the house whole again. Nothing is cosmetic; no shortcuts are taken. The house would be easily recognizable to the man who built it, and will be a beautiful welcoming thing for another 300 years at least.

The trees are just beginning to turn and Christina is replacing the planting that had to be pulled up to solve the drainage issue. The gardens are lovely already. It's an iconic Hudson Valley home. And the perfect Wogan Works project: a challenge to the intellect and the imagination, offering abundant opportunities to focus in on the finer details, creative work that takes muscle and leaves you with a good feeling of accomplishment at the end of the day.

As we talk, Wogan is looking across the street towards the big red barn. "One of these days, soon..." he says wistfully.

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