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the craftsman.

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A DREAM HOME REALIZED

Creating a vision.

BY DAVID GOODMAN



Doug and Toni Gordon had a vision. “We wanted something that fit in with the feeling and reason we love Stowe – the mountains, wilderness, something with a natural feel. I wanted a mountain house that blends in and is really cool.”

Gordon, who works in money management in Boston, took his vision to Steve Sisler. What did the Stowe-area builder make of this?

Dreams. That’s how many conversations begin with Sisler.

“We try to create synergy between the owner, architect and builder to make ideas come to reality,” says Steve.

Gordon and Boston architect Marcus Gleysteen met with Steve and ultimately selected Sisler Builders to build the 8,500 square foot country contemporary mountain house in Stowe. Gordon says of his choice of builders, “Steve certainly had the experience – and then some – having built some other homes that had a similar look, feel and magnitude of what we were after.”

But there was more. “Steve helped ground the whole project. He’s highly intelligent and practical – but not, frankly, too practical. Because you want really nice stuff. Steve understood that.”



The Gordon house combines elegance and innovation, and uses a mix of local and imported materials, while featuring state-of-the-art energy efficiency. Outside, the Champlain valley stone veneer and the Douglas-fir timbers have the feel of a ski lodge. Inside, giant windows are oriented toward the mountains, bringing the grandeur and beauty of the landscape into the living room.

The master bedroom is connected to the house via a bridge over a dry river. Downstairs is all about fun: there is a TV and spacious rec room with bleacher seats and cozy nooks for the three Gordon children to hang out.

Steve stands at a large concrete countertop in the kitchen beneath cathedral ceilings clad in Douglas-fir and surrounded by warm natural-hued southern yellow pine cabinetry. He points up to a stone fireplace that rises two stories. “I like the interplay of Woodbury granite and the timbers. It’s striking, but not too massive.”

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What's in your Garden?

A shared passion
brings a
bountiful harvest.

BY PETER MERRILL



Danny Young tends to his garden near the Canadian border.

Over 20 years ago Danny Young and two of his friends purchased 200 acres in Westfield, Vermont. They divided up the land, built modest homes, planted crops and raised livestock to meet their needs – no mean feat in this remote town less than 20 miles from the Canadian border. For most of that time, Danny worked for Sisler Builders, leaving and returning in the dark during most months of the year in order to make the 40-mile trek back and forth to work. When he retired a few years ago, he said the thing he was looking forward to most was spending more time in his garden.

It turns out Danny's not alone in his passion for gardening. While it may seem improbable for such a seemingly rough and tumble group, it's not unusual to find members of the Sisler crew in lunchtime discussions over pickling techniques, pest control secrets and composting choices – and its not just chips and Twinkies in their lunch bags either, as many bring fresh

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vegetables, fruits, pies and other dishes to eat and share. Scott Langlois put in some raised beds a few years ago and grows tomatoes in sheet rock buckets that he paints dark green to hold the heat in. "I've eaten

more salads this summer than I ever have in my life" says Scott. "The stuff just keeps on coming." "My garden is my "Therapy Patch" says Matt Rouleau. "It's where I go to relax and unwind, and the fresh vegetables are just a bonus." Matt has been gardening for over 20 years, and every summer he renews a friendly fight against the deer, squirrels, raccoons and other vermin that threaten his garden. "They keep a closer eye on things than you do, and just when it's time to harvest you find they've already beaten you to it. I used to tell my son that it was all right and that I would go after my vegetables in November, but it turns out I am only a marginal hunter, and the deer and the others usually get the last laugh."

Not all of us have skills equal to our passion. Ten years ago or so my wife and I purchased an old farm here in Morrisville, and I set about trying to reclaim an old vegetable garden. After much kicking and swearing, I finally managed to fire up the old Troy-Bilt rototiller that came with the place. The blunt tines barely dug into the hard ground, and the wretched machine dragged me around the garden be



Artichoke blossoms

fore finally depositing me onto my stomach with nothing more than the plastic hand-grips still in my hands. I've since gone to raised beds, and despite the never ending weeding and an aging yellow lab who loves fresh broccoli and strawberries as much as I do, I never seem to tire of working in my garden. From the first asparagus in May to the carrots and parsnips I pull for Christmas dinner, my garden yields its rewards throughout much of the year.

Up in Westfield, Danny is busy "putting food by" for the winter. He grinds his own grains, and he pickles, dries or stores many of the fruits and vegetables he grows. Between the garden and the pigs and chickens he raises, he is able to meet almost all of his food needs. "Pretty much all I buy is coffee, flour and sugar" says Danny. In all, he grows over 30 different fruits and vegetables including things I wouldn't even attempt like artichokes and melons. Fortunately, you don't have to be good at gardening to enjoy it. Here at my place, even my goats like gardening. Last fall we threw them some pumpkins to eat, and this summer a pumpkin plant grew up in their pen. They, and we, watched it all summer long. They waited for the pumpkins to ripen, and then they ate them plants and all, and that was that. sb

COMMUNICATION

A detail not to be overlooked.

BY STEVE SISLER



It's a well-known fact that good communication is a critical element of business success, and this couldn't be truer than in our business where the success of each project depends heavily on the careful management of hundreds if not thousands of small details. Having the right materials and equipment, the right crew and subcontractors and the right architect and other professionals are very important, but it's the coordination of these various people and elements that typically make or break a project.

I tell our people that they should never be afraid to ask a question or to speak up if they don't understand something, or if they see something that doesn't look quite right, and I try to do the same in my own dealings with our customers, their architects and everyone else involved in our work. It's a policy that has kept us out of trouble and allowed us to grow our business and to continually expand our skill set.

The owners, the architect, structural engineer, landscape architect and many of the vendors on the Gordon project (see page 1) were all new to us. By creating efficient, open lines of communication, we were able to gain the owner's trust and confidence and to reduce the stress of all involved. On this project, we were challenged to explore and utilize new structural techniques and new and different approaches to custom door construction, timber framing details, main stair construction and interior trim detailing. It felt good to be pushed; to demonstrate the extent of our skills and to build upon them - something we never would have been able to do without the confidence of all involved. I like to think that our enthusiasm for pushing the envelope is part of our company culture. Custom homes, large or small, often contain fresh sets of challenges to make our lives interesting, and after twenty-nine years, we have a pretty good base of experience to help us make sense of the new challenges and opportunities that each project presents.

Of course the other key to good communication is being a good listener. We try very hard to listen to our customers and their design teams and to understand their needs. Again, this not only helps us to avoid mistakes, but it's also led to some very interesting opportunities for us. Our new custom woodworking division is a perfect example of this. In recent years we've seen a growing interest among our customers in things like custom built-ins, freestanding furniture and other intricate woodworking applications. The woodworking division allows us to meet this need while broadening our overall skill set and offering a creative outlet for some of our most talented people – and besides, it's FUN. sb



Custom woodworking for Gordon project.



Interior stair for mountain home project.

“ Working with Sisler Builders in the design and fabrication of custom furniture pieces has been very rewarding. Seth and Glen's access to unique wood resources, combined with their insights and abilities, have resulted in some of the most spectacular collaborations we have been privileged to participate in. ”

- Marcus Gleysteen AIA



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I ask Doug Gordon about his favorite detail. “I love the fireplace,” he says quickly, then adds, “I love the bridge to the master bedroom. And I love seeing down the valley from the bedroom.”

Steve explains that there is a story behind the fireplace. He, Marcus, and mason Matt Parisi traveled to the defunct Woodbury quarry, the oldest quarry in the country, to pick out the perfect slab of granite for the lintel – the large stone over the firebox. As they spent an afternoon hiking around the quarry balancing different stones on each other, they sent picture messages to Doug to get his real-time input. The end result is a fireplace that is a striking centerpiece of the house.

A dining room table made of reclaimed American walnut with ebony inlays, complete with old nail holes, was another Sisler Builders creation as were a number of built-ins and custom cabinets.

Steve stands in the entryway, which features a beautiful granite staircase, and points to the inviting and airy view into the living room. The plans originally called for a wall that would have blocked this view, until Steve proposed an alternative that allowed light in. It was one of many on-the-fly design changes that required close communication.

“I enjoy a team approach with the owner and architect

where we all have a willingness to share,” says Steve. “I’ll put my ideas out there whenever I see a way to make a project work better.”

“We made very significant changes as it was going based on conversations with Steve,” adds Gordon. “Neither Steve nor our architect were shy in presenting alternatives.” Regarding the re-designed entry, “We all couldn’t be happier,” says Gordon. “It’s exactly what I was looking for in an entrance.”

Eighteen months after they conceived of their dream home, Doug and Toni Gordon and their three kids moved into their new mountain home on New Year’s Day 2012.

“It was a wonderful process,” reflects Gordon. “I never felt concerned that the project was going to weave off course. Steve kept me totally in the loop and he appreciated and acknowledged our feedback. There was a very healthy interaction. He kept us on task but he also built excitement. It wasn’t a job for us, it was an exciting process.”

“At end of day,” muses Gordon, “our favorite part of the house is that we love the property. The house and the view all fit so well. You have this vast open view outside and the stone and woodwork inside. You get that feeling that you are in Vermont. You feel that you are up in the mountains.” 