

AERIAL VERMONT | A BURLINGTON BISTRO | YESTERMORROW BUILDING SCHOOL

VERMONT

JUNE 2000

The Internet Comes to Vermont

SILICON ALLEY IN THE
CHAMPLAIN VALLEY

MASTERING THE INTERNET
AT MARLBORO COLLEGE

VERMONT'S COOLEST SITES

GREAT GETAWAYS SWEEPSTAKES PAGE 15

\$3.50 (CANADA \$3.95)
DISPLAY UNTIL JULY 15





COURTESY OF YESTERMORROW



COURTESY OF YESTERMORROW

STUDYING CRAFT
AND DESIGN AT
YESTERMORROW
BY ANN DEMUTH

BACK TO SCHOOL

YESTERMORROW Design/Build School, an eclectic collection of architects, builders, and artisans located in the Mad River Valley town of Warren, teaches design to students from all over the country. John Connell, who founded the nonprofit organization, says that when the school began to take off it “started to be a lot about the people, and a lot less about Architecture with a capital A. We started to realize that architecture, which was still being inspired by Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright, could be inspired by the actual student. Their wants and dreams were absolutely all you needed to shape and design a really unique piece of architecture. We developed this new way of teaching to get them in touch with that.”

Although its teaching principles remain the same, Yestermorrow is celebrating its

20th anniversary with some major changes. The 32-acre campus is in the midst of a \$270,000 renovation and a million dollar fund-raising campaign. Courses which before had been scattered about in different locations now have a central year-round home. Demo projects around the campus, including a solar shower, a composting toilet outhouse, and a timber-frame cabin with straw bale infill, are built by students.

The first Yestermorrow class had a slightly different campus. With a ten thousand dollar inheritance from his grandfather to get started, John Connell made arrangements with a school to use their facilities for his first class. That fell through two weeks before the first three Yestermorrow students were to show up. In a mad scramble, he found new lodging and another renovation project. Last year, Yestermorrow had well

over 200 students, and, according to director Peter Walcott, they expect to double enrollment in the next three years. Along with the original Home Design/Build course, classes are now offered in timber framing, straw bale construction, landscaping, stone masonry, and woodworking. Included in the professional courses, which can be taken for college credit, are materials and tectonics and ecological design/build.

Over the course of 16 years, numerous architects taking the pro classes had a hand in the on-going Waitsfield 10, a house designed and built by students over the years. According to John Connell, “the building was designed to be a very, very difficult project to design and build. The mate-

Above left: Yestermorrow students at work.

Above right: Small scale design.



Elaborate playgrounds constructed by Yestermorrow students are open to kids in the Warren area.

JARED POLESKY

rials are all locally acquired or sustainably harvested. The water is treated and purified with a special system that uses no electricity and no chemicals. And the sewage stream is processed by an engineered marsh that is housed in the greenhouse." Not all of the projects for the hands-on building component span 16 years; most are finished during the class and most involve work within the community. As a result, kids growing up in the Warren/Waitsfield/Fayston area can use playgrounds complete with elaborate climbing structures, a castle, a dragon, and a huge open-air covered sandbox. Residents also have Yestermorrow to thank for a band shell and a heavy-duty flatbread pizza oven.

PETER WALCOTT HELPED BUILD the huge open-air covered sandbox when he came to Yestermorrow for the two-week Home Design/Build course in August 1994. "I was looking to get out of office jobs and start working with my hands. It really changed my life," he says. After the class, he left the corporate world, became a carpenter's helper for six months, bought three row-homes in Baltimore for resale, and went into the business of home renovation. He kept coming back to Yestermorrow to take other courses. Eventually his nonprofit management experience was put to use and he became a member of the school's board of directors. From there he moved on to assistant director and today as executive director. "Yestermorrow is about personal empowerment, Peter says. "It's a very spiritual experience. People realize how much we've given up to specialization. When something breaks, it goes in the trash, as opposed to 'I understand how this works. I can fix it. I can figure out how to make it work again.'"

Fixing things and making things work also ties into the bigger picture of communities and sustainability. John Connell cites the low national average of how long people stay in a house. "People aren't connected with a house anymore, so they're not connected with their community," he says. "The American notion of community is, 'I'm going to move to the best home I can afford, and if the crime gets too bad, if the schools aren't good enough, or if the pollution picks up, I'll just move, no problem.' If we could get people to really reconnect with their homes, maybe not by sinking every nail, but if you could get people who at least understood their homes and are involved with the design, if not with the construction, they would invest some interest in it. The house is about them, not about some real estate product, and so maybe they're a little more reluctant to sell and if you stay at a place for ten years or more, all of a sudden you care about the crime, you care about the schools, you care about the community. That might be the most powerful thing Yestermorrow could do."

YESTERMORROW GOES ABOUT its mission with intensity. I attended part of a one-week Home Design course and, as one student said, it was "like being cut off from the rest of the world." Another said it was such an incredible luxury to be able to take a full week and focus on nothing but design. And it was a full week. Class started in the morning at 8:30. After dinner, it was not unusual to be sketching at the drafting table until eleven or twelve.

Perhaps because of the intensity, perhaps because the group just happened to be a medley of like-minded people, everyone got to know each other quickly and took an

avid interest in each other's designs. I joined Lisa, a veterinarian from Massachusetts; Peter, an energy retrofitter from New Hampshire; Norman, a financial consultant from North Carolina; Wendy, a woodworker from Connecticut; and Gary, a semi-retired field engineer from Minnesota.

Paul Hanke was the lead instructor and had visiting architects help out evenings. We watched slides of different forms, shapes, styles, and periods and were probed to answer questions with more than "I like it," or "it's ugly." When no answers were forthcoming, Paul would probe further: "Well, if you did know, what would you think?" When the house with the goose down ceilings and even more unique exterior flashed onto the screen, or when the razor-edged modern house appeared, you'd hear him mutter, "Everything's a design opportunity."

We went on an incredible house tour the first full day. Bombarded with new ideas and possibilities, it was hard to zero in on the drawings and models that would eventually take shape over the course of the week, preparatory to a final presentation on the last day before the review board of architects.

But no matter. If our final presentations didn't feel final, we knew we could always come back. Yestermorrow has a policy that once you've taken a course, you can repeat it at any time, without charge. That's a handy thing, considering everything's a design opportunity. **V**

For more information about the courses taught at Yestermorrow, call 888-496-5541 or visit their web site at www.yestermorrow.org. Ann DeMuth lives in Shelburne. She is a graphic designer and teaches woodworking and stained glass.