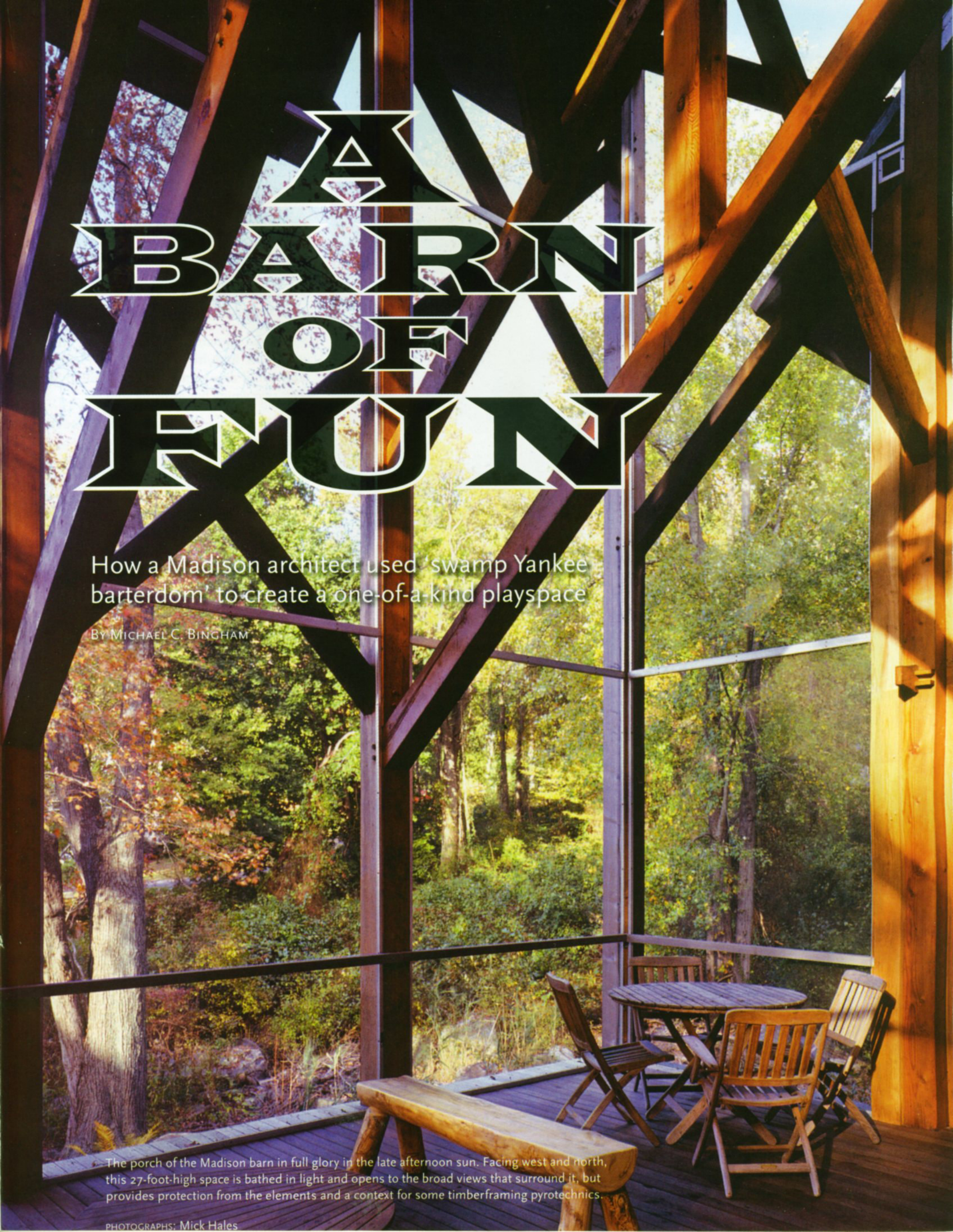
A BARN OF FUN

How a Madison architect used 'swamp Yankee barterdom' to create a one-of-a-kind playspace

By Michael C. Bingham



The porch of the Madison barn in full glory in the late afternoon sun. Facing west and north, this 27-foot-high space is bathed in light and opens to the broad views that surround it, but provides protection from the elements and a context for some timberframing pyrotechnics.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Mick Hales

Using every conceivable cash-saving tactic allowed Dickinson to save as much as $100,000.

As he leads a visitor through his Madison "Barn of Fun," one gets the idea that architect Duo Dickinson has a personal relationship with each piece of wood in the hand-crafted post-and-beam structure.

At approximately "zillions" of individual "sticks" (as Dickinson calls them), that's a lot of relationships.

There are at least 32 different species represented in the whimsical structure set on an undeveloped glacial moraine landscape once used as a sheep pasture.

The 1,650-square-foot barn is a masterpiece of creativity — and not just architecturally. Virtually every aspect of its creation involved solving some seemingly intractable problem.

As the many remaining examples that dot the Connecticut landscape in this (mostly) post-agricultural era remind us, barns are built for work, not play. Hard work, too: milking, mucking, feeding, storing, building, birthing.

The Dickinson barn is a bit different.

The project began innocently enough. In 1997 Dickinson asked his eight-year-old son, Wil, if he would like to have a "fun barn" built on the side of their house. The youngster responded, "No, Dad, I do not want a fun barn — I want a Barn of Fun."

And who wouldn't? But beyond fun, Dickinson and his wife Liz had longer-range child-development issues in mind for their two young but growing sons.

"Tales of teenagers getting into real trouble at distant parties led us to believe it is best to have the parties at our house," Dickinson says. "Thus a space that is not under our direct supervision, that is fun and rugged enough to accommodate the usual teenage predilections for music and behavior that parents hate makes sense. This means games, TV and piano.

"Oxymoronically, we hoped to keep our children closer by casting them out of the walls of their home," Dickinson says.

But first the senior Dickinsons had to figure out exactly what, and where, that "space" would be.

The transaction that would allow the Dickinsons room to erect an outbuilding was as serendipitous as the structure that would eventually occupy it.

When the family built its 1,800-square-foot home in 1983, they fully envisioned that their 1.2-acre parcel was "it." The property was bounded by a salt marsh, immovable septic system, front-yard setback and 200-year-old red oak tree.

Then in 1995 came a client of Dickinson's looking for a piece of land to build a home. The architect knew that the local Boy Scout chapter was thinking of selling a three-acre parcel on Dickinson's eastern boundary. The architect put the client in touch with the Boy Scouts, and a deal was quickly done.

Then Dickinson posed an unusual proposition to his client: Give me as much land as I will need to create the septic field for an outbuilding, and I will accept the

land as my fee for designing the client's home on the remainder of the site. The client accepted, and deeded to Dickinson the approximately 0.67 acre he would need for a fairly substantial outbuilding and its septic field.

That was just the first in a long line of creative tactics to preserve outlays of cold, hard cash for the project. Once Dickinson roughed out a preliminary design for the barn, he wrote to ten post-and-beam companies that "I thought might be interesting to work with." One leapt at the chance: Walpole, N.H.-based Bensonwood, led by post-and-beam guru Tedd Benson.

Dickinson proposed to Benson several ways to keep costs down:

- Using any and all "leftover" building materials from other jobs.
- Using any wood Benson wanted. The eye-popping result was a structure employing no fewer than 32 species of timber.
- No deadline. The Bensonwood crew could work on the project when they weren't otherwise occupied.

• Dickinson was confident the project would get published, so the anticipated positive publicity was part of Bensonwood's "fee."

Such cash-saving creativity, Dickinson says, "evidences the best spirit of 'swamp Yankee 'barterdom.'"

Benson agreed to the terms, and construction began in early 2002. Interior and exterior finish work took the next two years. Dickinson estimates he spent about $250,000 "out of pocket" on the barn — compared to the $350,000 he estimates it would have cost if he had paid retail for everything.

The result is an unforgettable symphony of timber. The barn's interior was a collaboration between Dickinson and craftsman Tim Mills, whom Dickinson afforded wide latitude to let his imagination run wild. Whimsical and in some cases non-functional architectural details share space with exposed electrical work and old-fashioned woolen mill fans to circulate air throughout the barn, which soars to 26 feet at its highest point.

Down below are at least nine varieties of wood in the floor alone, provided by Wood, Steel & Glass in Madison, which sells recycled or salvaged wood. A "bridge" that spans the entry way is made from strips of redwood salvaged from a 1880s California trestle bridge, as well as "bizarre" cuts of maple, cypress, tulip wood, mahogany and other woods.

The barn houses a full kitchen, bath, guest bedroom with library, fitness room and game room. The guest sleeping space is separated from the rest of the second-story

Leftover 1.5-inch tongue-and-groove flooring is arced to provide stiffness for fixed plywood shelving erected on a curve. This space serves as a guest bedroom.

Recessed concrete piers allow the structure of the barn to avoid the fragile wetlands to the right, while an ancient white oak (right) sits between the barn and house. The plantation-grown cypress board-and-batten siding has some 'animation' at the base of the heated space (left), while the expansive screen porch rises to the right.

living space by a unique curving wall that incorporates book shelving. The largest space is a vast screen porch where the family gathers on summer evenings to watch The Simpsons, kind of a family ritual.

The barn is environmentally benign, resting tranquilly amid its glacial moraine surroundings. Dickinson says about one-third of the wood is old-growth wood being reused, while another third is plantation-growth.

Further, because it is set on a coastal/tidal/inland wetlands site, the project was forced to confront "the classic limitations present of coastal or near-coastal sites, whether the buildings face saltwater or on lakes, rivers and wetlands that are increasingly viewed as being ecologically fragile," the architect says.

A majestic 150-year-old white oak immediately to the east of the original house prevented Dickinson from building the new structure simply as a "tacked-on social space" to the house. In addition, Dickinson and his contractors worked around three gigantic boulders on the site, instead of merely blasting away.

"The greenest of green ideas is that we actually disturbed nothing," says Dickinson. "We actually cut just one tree down — kind of a junk red oak tree that we salvaged for flooring."

Also, the barn's screen porch and careful window location obviated the need for air conditioning. (Says the architect: "I don't believe in air conditioning.") Moreover, the windows themselves were all "mistake" windows that the manufacturer sold to Dickinson for about $100 each, or roughly 20 percent of their retail price.

And all of it utterly adapted to teenagers. "We wanted to have a space where teenage boys could be separate from us — and yet we knew exactly where they were," explains Dickinson. "We could monitor them without being in their face."

The result is "our vacation home right here," Dickinson says. "It's the best thing I ever did as an architect for my family."

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