

Builder/Architect

Vermont Edition

August 2001

Our
64th
Year



Jim Huntington Design/Build
From Concept to Completion

Publisher's Note

This month, *Builder/Architect* is in Chittenden County to profile a builder who started out building timber frame houses, like our previous builder Roy Dunphey, but now does a little bit of everything (as you'll see in Carolyn's photos)—Jim Huntington, of Charlotte.

Says Huntington, "I was known for timber framing for years. So that's the kind of calls I got. Now, I get calls for...I don't know what you'd call it. Vernacular, I guess. People see a house I've built, they like it and they want something similar, yet unique."

And that's what he provides. Whether it's in the style of a Greek Revival farmhouse, like the one where he spent his early summers in Orford, New Hampshire, or an "Adirondack-camp-meets-craftsman-style" home like the one featured in Carolyn's cover photo (and several inside photos as well), Huntington shepherds the project "from concept to completion"—using his design skills to plan the house that fits both his clients' needs and their budget, and using both his own woodworking skills and the talents of his long-time subcontracting crew to bring that project to fruition.

Whatever the project entails, Huntington gives it his complete focus. "I really prefer to just concentrate on one house at a time," he says. "That gives me as much as a whole year to work on it. It's nicer to take

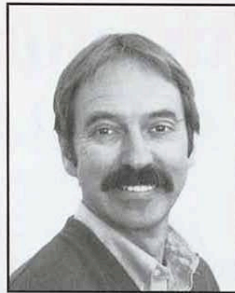
the time. That way, I can give it my all."

Of his subcontracting crew, Huntington says, "I'm nowhere without all those people. I'm really dependent on having all those people around. All the subs give input. That's the fun part. Everyone's got ideas. Changes could come from an electrician one day, a carpenter another day. I can't say enough about the people I've been fortunate enough to work with."

Ironically, three of Huntington's most valued subcontractors, all of whom contributed to the home on the cover (and many other Huntington projects), died tragically just after completion of the project, leaving it in a way as a memorial to their skills. Steve Smith did the painting with partner Dana Lavigne, Todd Alyward installed the tile, and Johnny Lavre was lead electrician for JFS Electric. Vermont's building community lost three talented artisans with their untimely passing.

Next month, *B/A* travels to the Northeast Kingdom to showcase a beautiful and "Smart" home built on Lake Willoughby by Darryl and Carol Davis at Creative Building and Design of Barton.

Until then,
Dick Nelson,
Publisher



Dick Nelson

"We Do Cedar Right!"



"Congratulations,
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Huntington"

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Jim Huntington Design/Build From Concept to Completion

By Stephanie Nelson

For Jim Huntington, every house he builds is a unique creation, a work of art...customized for that particular client from start to finish. It could be timber frame, his original specialty, or conventional stick-built construction...or a combination, his focus more recently. Or maybe even an "Adirondack-camp-meets-Craftsman-style" house, which is how the owner describes the home featured on the cover of this month's magazine.

Whatever the style, each house he creates will bear Huntington's imprimatur from concept to completion.

You see, when you hire Jim Huntington, you hire someone who will

help you find the best location for your new home, turn your ideas into a concrete plan on his drawing board, fine-tune that plan during construction, assemble a top-notch subcontracting team to execute the plan, and also to personally "fill in the gaps" along the way, like building custom cabinetry in his home-based shop.

"I really prefer to just concentrate on one house at a time," he says. "That gives me as much as a whole year to work on it. It's nicer to take the time. That way, I can give it my all."

It hasn't always been that way.

Over his two-decade building ca-

reer, Huntington has gone through a number of evolutions to reach the point he's at today.

After graduating from UVM in 1978, he decided to get into home building "as a way to ski and have a career," and to avoid the prospect of a lifetime "in a cubicle" as part of the family insurance business in New Rochelle, NY.

"I had never picked up a hammer," he recalls, "never done any of that, never built anything. I worked with two different timber frame outfits, for three months each. I thought after that I knew enough, which I found certainly wasn't true. I had to ask a lot of

Huntington's own cottage-style home in Charlotte features a steep-pitched roof, lots of gables and dormers and an expansive front porch. The size of the original 1,300-square-foot home, at right, was about doubled by an addition, left of front door, that includes a family/"ping pong" room and mud room on the first floor and master bath and bedroom, opening onto a "cocktail deck" overlooking Lake Champlain, atop. Not shown at left, a barn housing Huntington's shop/office, built in 1995. On the walk, Jim and Carol Huntington and their dog, Sadie. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.





Five-year-old Jack Kantor runs past this 1,750-square-foot farmhouse-style home designed and built by Jim Huntington. It features a traditional exterior and expansive, open interior. At right, rear, Camel's Hump. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.

regularly for built-in units, and then with another partner, before going out on his own. Throughout that period, the focus was still on timber frame construction, which he describes as “more like a craft than just building.”

Over time, however, Huntington “drifted out of the actual building to just doing design work, along with general contracting, and subbing out all the carpentry. When I did that, Bob Schumacher, or ‘Shuey,’ became my lead carpenter and has been ever since. He’s a far better frame carpenter than I am. My role in the actual construction is to fill in whatever’s needed—kitchen cabinets, built-ins, build them in my shop and bring them over.”

His style of house has also evolved.

Says Huntington: “I was known for timber framing for years. So that’s the kind of calls I got. Now I get calls for...I don’t know what you’d call it. Vernacular, I guess. People see a house I’ve built, they like it and they want something similar, yet unique.”

Another evolution: the size of his business. There have been times where he’s had as many as four new projects at various stages of completion, and maybe other projects as well, but no longer.

“For so many years, it was 50- to 60-hour weeks. I had employees, but there was so much paperwork. To do all the business work, design work, and be on site. It was just too much. I’m trying to cut back on that.” Part of

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questions to get through my first few houses.”

He had gravitated toward timber frame construction as reminiscent of buildings in Orford, NH, where his family still owns a three-season, uninsulated farmhouse.

“It’s an old Greek Revival-style farmhouse, right on the (Connecticut) river, full of barns and fields, that goes back to my great-grandfather.

We call it ‘The Farm.’ I loved all those old barns you’d see around Orford,” he says. “At that time, timber framing was just getting back on the scene. It was rediscovered when people started rebuilding barns. They appreciated the joinery, the big beams. I loved all that.”

For a few years, he operated a home building business with a cousin, Fred Haulenbeek, whom he still calls upon

“The idea was to design and build a farmhouse-vernacular style, with lots of light sources, including a cupola,” says Huntington of this Charlotte project, which also includes a horse barn. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.





Stepping inside that same Charlotte home, Liz Poulsen and her son, Christopher, corral their dog, Perry, while Eli grabs a strawberry. The kitchen features a bird's-eye maple countertop, unique red elm flooring and Pella windows. All cabinets custom-built by Jim Huntington. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.

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the reason, a heart attack four years ago.

"It came as a complete surprise," he says. "After that, I realized life's a short dance, so you need to get as much out of it as possible."

One result of that epiphany was the decision to take his first vacation in 12 years in 1998, finishing with three weeks in Homer, Alaska, with his wife, Carol, and two young sons.

"At the end of those three weeks, Carol and I looked at each other and said, 'Three weeks is not enough.'" They decided a year would be more

like it. "Mountains, oceans, glaciers all at once," he says. "I loved it." Fortunately, Carol, a special education teacher at Lawrence Barnes School in Burlington's North End, was able to take a year's sabbatical and also find a one-year teaching position in Alaska. For Jim, prospects for livelihood were more iffy.

"I thought I'd be at a McDonald's window. But three weeks after I got there I had a design/build job. I was lucky. I brought Bob Schumacher out to help frame the house, then I finished it off myself, with some help

from the owner. It ended up as a very gratifying experience, with all the great people we worked with there. It made us think twice about staying in Alaska."

Since he's returned from Alaska, Huntington has gravitated toward the more minimalist approach, doing only one major project at a time, using a formula he describes thusly: "I meet people, and if we agree on what they want, then I just ask them, 'How much money do you have to spend?'" Then we design it, based on that budget. I might tell them, 'You can't

The exterior of the home on our cover, which was completely “re-concepted” by Jim Huntington after being hired by the owners, becoming a woodsy “Adirondack-meets-Craftsman-style” dwelling. It features real cedar shingles, supplied and stained by Cleveland Cedar, building materials from Rice Lumber, and excavation work by Wes Patnaude. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.



build that big a house for that budget.’ Quality first, and size second.

“Sometimes, I’m given next to nothing to start with. More often, they’ll have seen a house I’ve built and they say, ‘I like that house.’ A lot of times, I’m given a fairly free hand. Other times, they have very specific requirements. The part I enjoy is trying to fit it all together and onto the land. It’s a puzzle.

“Usually, I start by going up to the land and just standing around. I see what I think will fit on the land. It’s a crucial part. All that time and money. You want to make sure the house will fit the land as best it can. Then I’ll draw a ‘sketch’ (an outside elevation and an inside floor plan) and take the people out to the land with that and explain how it will fit there. If they like it, great. If not, we change it.”

Huntington says he does his design

work these days the old-fashioned way, by hand.

“I started out on a drawing board,” he explains. “Then, when we went to Alaska, I spent a whole winter learning CAD. I thought I was going to

switch over. I designed the house I did out there on a computer. It’s nice for the clients. They can see it in 3D. But now I’ve switched back. With the computer, I was reading manuals too much, I couldn’t create. It didn’t flow as well. I find it much easier to draw. I guess you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.

“Once (the initial design) is done, it’s a fairly long process of making it all work. There’s a lot of fine-tuning, a lot of back and forth with the clients. You find out what their specific needs are. I tell people it’s a fluid process. We’re bound to make changes. As much as the owners make changes, so do I. You’ll walk in one day and see a wall and you don’t like it. Tear it out. A lot of times a client will say, ‘What’s going to happen with this?’ I like to say, ‘We’ll figure that out when we get there.’”

Another important ingredient is his longtime subcontracting team.

“I’m nowhere without all those people,” he says. “I’m really dependent on having all those people around. All the subs give input. That’s the fun part. Everyone’s got ideas.

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The home’s kitchen shows butcher block island, antique pine flooring, plus custom cabinets built by Jim Huntington, and is accented with hardware from Close To Home. Installation of slate countertops and ceramic tile was done by Todd Alyward, painting by Steve Smith and Dana Lavigne, and lead electrician for JFS Electric was Johnny Lavre. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.



The home's three-season porch shows unusual black locust flooring, with screens custom-made by Rice Lumber and stonework by Loren Hogaboom. Speakers are part of the sound system from Creative Sound. Photo by Carolyn L. Bates.

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Changes could come from an electrician one day, a carpenter another day. I can't say enough about the people I've been fortunate enough to work with."

In the end, maybe four months later for a smaller house, up to a year or more for a larger one, comes a finished product that everyone can be proud of.

The process certainly worked for clients John Barlow and Liz Poulsen, for whom Huntington built a 4,000-square-foot "farmhouse-style" home in Charlotte, along with a barn for horses.

"We'd seen an article about Jim in *Vermont Magazine*," says Poulsen.

"We asked around and heard a lot of good things about him. But at that time, he'd gone to Alaska for a year, so we thought we'd missed out. Fortunately, it took us long enough to figure out what we wanted to do that he was back. We met with him once and decided to go ahead. I gave him a two-page list of what I wanted the house to be, a list of things for each room, and the next time we met he showed us a picture of the outside and a floor plan for the inside and it was just what we wanted. It was perfect. Everything was perfect. Looking back, it's better than we hoped it would be. All the rooms work. One of our criteria was that we wanted every

room to be used every day. They are. "Jim's the greatest, and so is his crew. They were all people who we were happy to have around.

"We would recommend Jim to anybody...as a person, as a professional. He's so easy to work with. He's totally open to suggestions, not offended by them at all. He's a friend now. His kids come over to help us hay. Building our house with Jim was a wonderful experience. I can't say enough good things about him."

Congratulations to New England Housewrights on being selected as Builder of the Month. You may reach Jim Huntington at P.O. Box 94, Charlotte, 05445. Or call (802) 425-2399.

B/A