

Rural Connections

Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England by Thomas C. Hubka; Univ. Press of New England; Hanover, N.H.; 1984; 223 pages; \$19.95 paperback, \$35.00 hardcover.



"Big house, little house, back house, barn"—the phrase comes from a 19th century children's song and it aptly describes most of the New England farmhouses of that time. The "big house" refers to the house proper, usually in the Cape Cod or Greek Revival style. The "little house" was a kitchen ell added to the big house. The "back house" denotes the woodshed, privy, and other support spaces placed next to the kitchen. The "barn," of course, was the barn.

This month's focal point is exteriors, and nothing could be considered more characteristic of the "look" of rural vernacular architecture in New England than the so-called *connected* farm buildings that dot our landscape to this day. Even people who have never ventured into this land of two seasons (Winter, and July) associate the connected form with popular images of New England through photos seen in *Vermont Life*, *Yankee*, and other magazines. The question posed by architect and professor Thomas Hubka is not why these buildings look as they do, but why they came to be built in this often meandering, but always adjacent manner.

The popular belief seems to be that connecting the barn to the

house by various subsidiary structures gave farmers in snow country a convenient covered passageway between buildings. But as Hubka points out, this building form was not used in other snowy regions such as upstate New York or Wisconsin. Moreover, he argues, the very real threat of fire spreading from one structure to another is greatly increased by physically connecting them, which is a strong argument *against* such a practice. In fact, says Hubka, connected construction was once prohibited by law in Reading, Massachusetts. Why then did most of New England's crusty hill farmers use this form when other types were certainly available?

The answer, says Hubka, lies in the complex relationships of many factors. For instance, a protected "dooryard" provided an important outdoor workspace, while the "front" yard gradually became more formal and building orientation shifted from southward to fronting-the-road. Then too, classical "townhouse" styles melded with the local farm building tradition to create what Hubka regards as a true innovation in regional style—a unified look from house to barn. The main house, of course, was most formal and received the most architectural detail, which then diminished from building to

building ending perhaps in a pair of Greek Revival cornice returns on the front side of the barn.

Another New England deviation from the Old World tradition was to substitute a single *barn* for the several *barns* which were common in England. Then there was the tendency for thrifty Yankees to maintain, reuse, and relocate existing buildings while continually modifying and adapting them to changing conditions. Technology too had an impact, as the development of the iron stove (versus the old massive fireplace) influenced kitchen design and allowed freer floorplans in the big house. Economics and sociology also find their way into Hubka's explanations, as he describes the continuing struggle with changing markets and poor soils, or the "mutuality" (Yankee individualism plus strong cooperative patterns), which he sees as the key to understanding 19th century rural life in the Northeast.

Hubka's points are illustrated by photos and nice axonometric sketches, often showing the progression of a sample farm over the years. Frequent case studies further illustrate his arguments. One of these ends the book, as Hubka explores why a certain Tobias Walker went to the considerable trouble of moving a rather large shed from one side of his house to the other. Footnotes and a lengthy glossary supplement the text. Informative and fascinating, albeit a touch on the scholarly side, *Big House, Little House...* provides much insight into both the characteristics of and reasons for the rural architectural heritage of New England.

—Paul Hanke

Free & Cheap

Hardboard Maintenance: A three-page brochure describing surface preparation, paint selection, repriming, and finishing procedures has been prepared by the American Hardboard Association. Single copies of *Maintenance Tips for Hardboard Siding* are available free from the Association by writing to them at 520 N. Hicks Rd., Palatine, IL 60067; 312/934-8800.

Words on Windows: A six-page pictorial glossary of window and door terms including drawings, pronunciation guides, usage notes, and the evolutions of words is available free to writers and reporters in the window industry. Call Jack Ullrich, manager of sales promotion and publicity for Andersen Corporation at 612/770-7212 or write to Andersen in Bayport, MN 55003.

Architectural Window Guides: Three publications are available from the American Architectural Manufacturers Association: *Windows*, a 36-page consumer guide, describes selection, installation, and maintenance procedures. The booklet discusses energy efficiency and provides tips on energy conservation. Copies cost \$2.00. *Window Selection Guide* aids in the planning and selection of windows. This 64-page manual discusses design considerations, 16 different window types, design and special features, performance requirements and testing, installation, and retrofitting. Copies cost \$16.00. And a 140-page storefront and entrance manual discusses basic design considerations, the use of quality materials, and careful workmanship. This manual, contained in a three-ring binder, costs \$50. Orders should be sent to AAMA, 2700 River Road, Des Plaines, IL 60018; 312/699-7310.

Siding Product Guides: Two new guides are available from the American Plywood Association: *Plywood Siding* (Form E300D), a 22-page booklet, provides advice on selection, application, finishing, refinishing, and maintenance. *Performance-Rated Siding* (Form M515), explains APA's new performance standard for exterior siding, and describes the characteristics and performance requirements of APA-trademarked structural wood panel and lap sidings. The eight-page brochure includes advice on finishing, storage, and handling. For free copies of any of these brochures, write to the American Plywood Association, P.O. Box 11700, Tacoma, WA 98411; 206/565-6600.

Concrete Resources: A 24-page guide detailing concrete-masonry wall construction is available. *Recommended Practices for Laying Concrete Block* explains procedures for mixing mortar, patching and cleaning block, cutting block, dampproofing, and insulation. It also provides detailed instructions and a photo for each step of the construction procedures. For a copy of the booklet send \$5.95 to Order Processing, Portland Cement Association, 5420 Old Orchard Road, Skokie, IL 60077; 312/966-9559. Also available is a free 1988-89 52-page catalog describing over 500 low-cost publications, computer programs, and audiovisual materials covering all types of design, construction, and maintenance of cement and concrete.

Better Connections: Simpson Strong-Tie Company's 1988 catalog *Connectors for Wood Construction* includes 16 new products added to the Strong-Tie line. This 48-page catalog updates specifications and provides descriptions, loading charts, application drawings and building code acceptance information. For a free copy, write to Simpson Strong-Tie, Marketing, P.O. Box 1568, San Leandro, CA 94577; 415/562.7775.

Asbestos Safety: An asbestos safety manual is available from the Construction Safety Association of Ontario. This two-volume set of data sheets aids in the renovation, repair, maintenance, and demolition of buildings containing asbestos. The first 12-page volume describes the location and identification of asbestos materials for the pre-bid inspection stage. The second 20-page volume covers health effects of exposure, required control measures, and training requirements for Ontario contractors. Booklets are \$6 (free to Ontario construction workers). Contact the Communications Department, Construction Safety Association of Ontario, 74 Victoria St., Toronto M5C 2A5; 416/366-1501.

Structural Panel Applications: A 56-page, full-color guide covering structural panel applications for floors, walls, siding, and roofs is available from the American Plywood Association. *APA Design/Construction Guide: Residential and Commercial* contains information on diaphragms, fire and wind-resistance, noise-control, and energy conservation. APA panel spacing recommendations and details on selection and specification of APA-trademarked panels are also included. For a free copy, write to the American Plywood Association, P.O. Box 11700, Tacoma, WA 98400, and request Form E30.

Sound Properties: Information on the relative sound-transmission properties of various combinations of different materials and thicknesses can be found in *Catalog of STC and IIC Ratings for Wall and Floor/Ceiling Assemblies* by Russell DuPree. This 162-page publication offering useful advice on sound insulation can be obtained free by submitting a typewritten request on your office stationery. Write to Environmental Planning and Local Health Services Branch, Department of Health Services, 714 P St., Room 600, Sacramento, CA 95814; 916/322-2040.