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## Building Shelter, Perfecting Perfection

With Technical Excellence and Aesthetic Design, Builder **Benjamin Kelley** Leaves a Distinctive Stamp

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# Building Shelter, Perfecting Perfection

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**W**ithin the technical, hammer-and-nails details of construction hides an oft-overlooked fact: A house is first and foremost a home, a living space where many of life's passages unfold, a kind of stage for real life drama. For Benjamin Kelley, his construction firm Building Shelter is an opportunity to fuse his twin passions for technical excellence and aesthetic design. Across the Island he has left his distinctive stamp on architecturally majestic and energy efficient homes.

An examination of Ben's work reveals rich detail and immaculate craftsmanship. High ceilings and sturdy wooden beams flow through spacious sunrooms and living rooms, while wraparound wooden decks outside mix with broad patios and stately pergolas.

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In this 800 sq. ft. Chilmark guesthouse, high ceilings and large windows and doors bring in light, air and the outside setting. The natural wood ceiling and floor complement the landscape. Architect Patrick Crossgrove designed previous projects for the homeowners and spared neither comfort nor detail on the tiny footprint.





On such a small footprint, the efficient use of space takes advantage of natural light. The result: A dwelling that feels larger than it is. Extensive areas of glass draw the eye to the landscape, further emphasizing a sense of spaciousness. Decks and privacy walls extend the living space without increasing the footprint. "Green" building consumes fewer resources without compromising an open feel and access to nature.



Hemlock and fir laminated beams, natural wood ceiling and floors are a paradoxical complement to the anodized aluminum window frames and commercial glazing. Clerestory windows flood the living and dining areas with overhead light.

**B**en's journey into the construction trade began in a roundabout manner. Born in California, he grew up in Washington State where his father installed carpet, tile, wood floors, and vinyl. By age 10 he was helping his father on projects, and by 18 he worked framing houses, hanging sheet rock, painting, and other manual jobs.

After a brief stint in college, he grew bored and began traveling through Mexico, South America and the Caribbean. After drifting to Fort Lauderdale in the spring of 1996, Ben hatched the idea of crewing a boat headed to Europe. After hearing that Martha's Vineyard was a good place to connect with a Europe-bound yacht, he tossed his possessions into a backpack, grabbed his last \$200, and hopped a Greyhound bus to Massachusetts. He stayed at the youth hostel in West Tisbury, where he quickly discovered that few boats travel from the Vineyard to Europe. He was a kind wash-ashore who came to the Vineyard deliberately to leave.

"I cajoled Chris Crowell and his wife Crystal to give me a job as a handy man and desk attendant at the hostel until I figured out a plan," he recalls. "And here I still am."

Ben was able to capitalize on his earlier work in construction to branch out

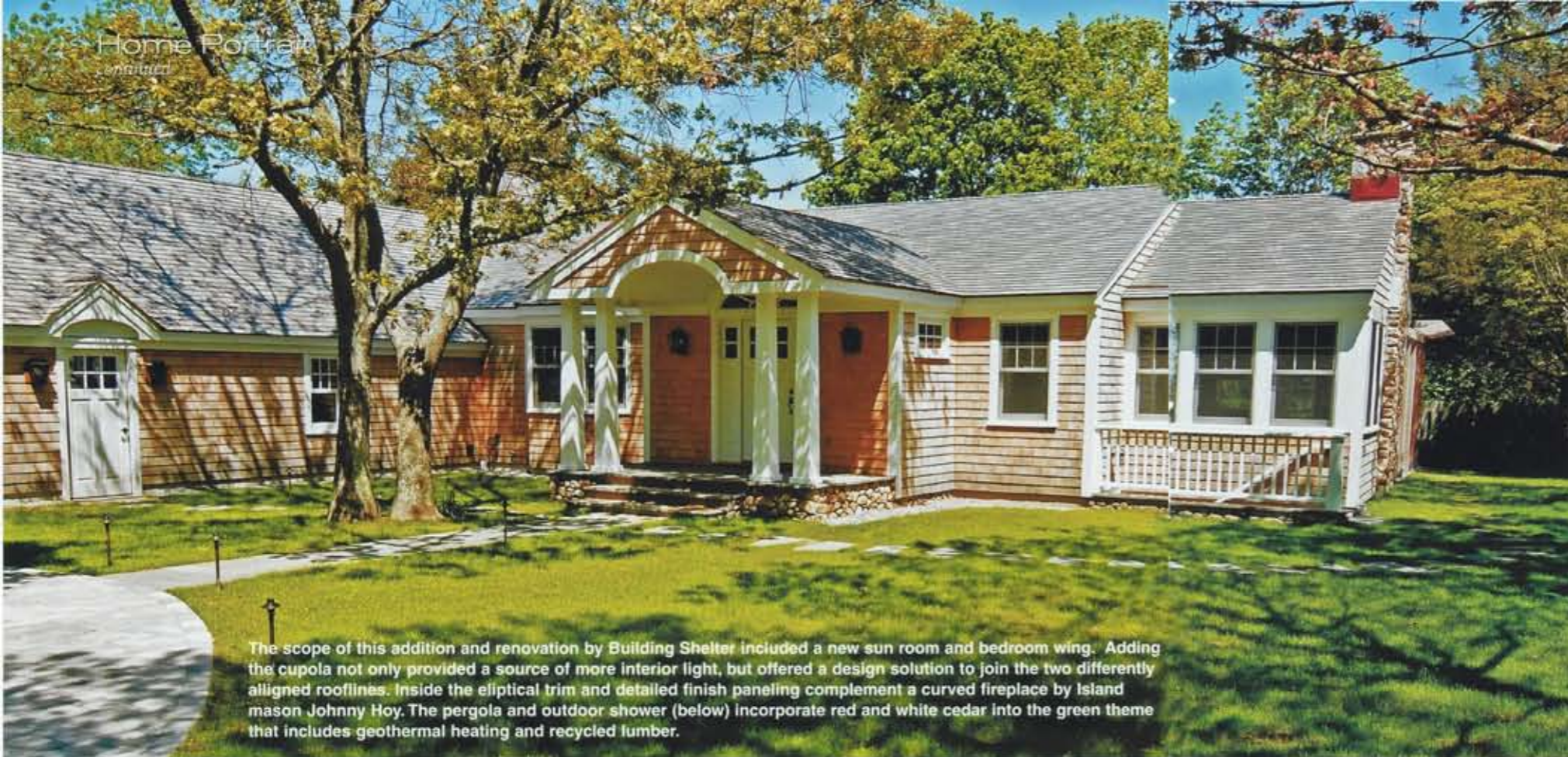
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Double bunks in the sleeping quarters and a private master bedroom (far left) allow the guest house to function for an entire family. The high ceiling and clean lines of the combined living, dining and cooking area (left) give the space an easy flow and relaxed feel.







The scope of this addition and renovation by Building Shelter included a new sun room and bedroom wing. Adding the cupola not only provided a source of more interior light, but offered a design solution to join the two differently aligned rooflines. Inside the elliptical trim and detailed finish paneling complement a curved fireplace by Island mason Johnny Hoy. The pergola and outdoor shower (below) incorporate red and white cedar into the green theme that includes geothermal heating and recycled lumber.



A focal highlight and practical solution in this Building Shelter kitchen is the custom-made African mahogany center island counter-top. The island performs triple duty as dining, storage and preparation areas.

into his own business, though he says he had to adjust from West Coast methods to the New England styles. "When I came to New England, I had to relearn most everything," he recalls. "We were doing truss roofs, not cut roofs, so I learned from other carpenters and contractors that aspect of framing. I learned a lot from Dana Hodsdon and Scott Bermudes. People were patient and generous."

He is quick to praise his colleagues in the building trades, from Nelson Mechanical and BTU to individuals like Tom Colligan and Jevon Rego.

"Without the professionalism and high-quality, conscientious work that these guys do, I could still be on a bus somewhere."

A critical part of his work involves communicating with customers and architects to match technical details to the overall vision of the home.

"For my clients, my primary concern is service," he says. "Building is a service industry, and that's an important part of the business to me. The best service I can provide for the families that will occupy the homes we build is to do high quality, conscientious work that will last. I've always thought that in the long run, good quality is cheap, and cheap is expensive, because inferior work is replaced, repaired and redone. Also important is standing behind our work and being available to clients when things come up."

While words like "service" and



"quality" have been bantered around to the point where they've become trite, Ben believes they remain the cornerstone of surviving in the competitive construction industry.

"It's true that these words are overused and have become a cliché. But these characteristics are qualities that help you in an economy like this. We need to make a profit to survive, but we've survived up to now because we care about

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As envisioned by Jim Cappuccino of Hutker Architects, the above addition draws seamlessly from the existing residence yet maintains its own identity and character. The outdoor shower is set into the ground, providing privacy and a small garden nook.



A small bathroom (above, right) relates the master bedroom to the children's room, both joining and separating one from the other. Hutker designer Susan Bielsky selected maple cabinets and flooring, with Lagos Azul stone countertops. Large windows (right) make the sitting area feel bigger, while the muted tones of the master bedroom, set at the extremity of the additions, (above) offer a serene atmosphere.



The breezeway hall provides abundant natural light and air. The clear red cedar on walls and ceiling were harvested from sustainable forests, and the bronze screen panels were custom made in Building Shelter's shop.







The porch restoration required 150 feet of custom railings, while the simulated camp style roof is actually a double roof for structural integrity.



Once an old tennis club, (above) this historical renovation adhered to the original specifications of the former grand East Chop porch (top). The tower restoration (right) required trim, roofing and siding, honoring the clients' vision of their ancestral home, which once served as a lighthouse.



what we do and the people we do it for," he says. "It's important to me that we deliver the best quality, the best service at the best possible price. This cornerstone of a business model should keep us above water in difficult and good times."

Ben has spent recent years learning how to incorporate environmentally healthy materials into homes and boost energy efficiency. While green has become another buzzword in the trade, he points out that going green is more complex than simply using recycled wood or avoiding formaldehyde-laden materials.

"Green doesn't just mean recycled countertops and alternative energy," he says. "It's a complicated system of labor, manufacturing, supply, raw materials, transportation, cost-to-benefit ratios, homeowner habits, and opportunity. What might be green for a small addition may not necessarily be green for a new home and vice versa."

He cites the popular use of bamboo flooring as an example. He concedes that the raw material may grow fast, but factor in the labor problems in China and the transportation across the ocean, and green bamboo is not so green anymore.

On recent projects he has been able to recycle framing studs, increase energy efficiency with new insulation products, and install geothermal heating and cooling systems.

Ben's curiosity and multitasking abilities help him navigate the challenging construction process. He enjoys projects that stretch his leadership and organizational abilities, when multiple variables must click together with machine-like precision to work.

"In what other field does one person work with the very

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Builder  
**Benjamin Kelley**  
In His Own Words

**W**hen we incorporated it was time for a new name. When I suggested "Building Shelter" it didn't really excite people like I thought it would, but it made sense to me. When brain storming, "Ben Kelley, Contractor" was often suggested – simple, to the point, who I am what I do. But I was inclined toward Building Shelter and that is who we are today. It still hasn't really caught on though, we're often referred to as "Building Shelters", asked if we build Emergency Shelters or Homeless Shelters, if we were a non-profit (sometimes, it feels like it).

But I stuck to the name, because, when I considered just what is a house, just what does it mean to build, what is it that I do? I concluded that building is a service that results in something I make, which affords protection, comfort, and refuge for the people who live in it. Putting some wood together that eventually looks like a house is not the end in itself- nor is the end the final payment. The end is a family home. This is how we view the building process from beginning to end: as a service to family. Since family can not be separated from its community or the environment in which it lives, Building is also a service to our community and our environment. We do our best to do the most we can for these values.

To be in business we must be competitive and profitable. So we developed our company infrastructure, our business systems, budgets, work orders, RFQ's, estimating software, skill development, building techniques, field paper work, schedules, JACIs, contracts, change orders, project completion documents – all the little things that comprise a business, all geared to the purpose of providing a renovation, an addition, or a new home with the best quality, the best service, at the best possible price with as much consideration as possible for our community and environment – and survive as a business committed to our ideals.

It didn't interest me to survive as parts assemblers, putting pieces together that eventually look like a house, I wanted us to thrive building homes for families that could be enjoyed for generations, homes that are sensitive to our community and connected to our environment. This is why we are Building Shelter. **VS**







By increasing the size of the dining room and adding windows along one wall, Building Shelter brought in natural light and the well maintained yard and large oak tree as part of this room's experience.

wealthy, artists, engineers, craftsmen, fishing fanatics and surf bums, supply chains, the state and town and other regulating/taxing agencies, independent subcontractors, non-English speakers, a vast array of challenging materials, technologies, applications, techniques and trends that change frequently?" he muses. "You put it in a bucket, shake it up, and out comes a nice house, on budget and on time, you hope."

Building Shelter takes on a variety of

projects, from ground-up construction to renovations and additions. Renovations and additions bring unique challenges to the table, since the condition and materials of the old structure can't be known until construction is under way. "For renovations and additions, the real challenge is the unknown: What's behind the stuff that we can't see. A client doesn't want us to open up their home before they know what something will cost," he says. "But it's hard to know what some-

thing might cost unless you can open up their home or have X-ray vision. We might carry the tie-in costs separate from the addition costs because one is more knowable than the other."

Back in Washington State Mr. Kelley worked on tract housing projects, a far cry from the custom high-end work he has the opportunity to do on Martha's Vineyard. "In general, due to the sort of clientele we are able to provide service to, we get to do great work, use great materials, employ



The outdoor sitting area looking across the yard and gardens to Vineyard Sound and features composite decking that will last many years without maintenance or loss of color. The little bunk room (above, right) sits in a small garden, shaded by large trees and surrounded by extensive stone work.



high quality techniques in a conscientious way – much different than the entry-level housing I worked in."

He is quick to praise the tradesman on the Island. "There is a superb pool of knowledgeable, high quality craftspeople here who generally care about their work and its impact on the world around them," he says.

A key aspect of Mr. Kelley's business philosophy is to engage in a continuing process of education and learning. He

has used new knowledge to tread lightly on the natural environment and support the community where his business prospers. Building Shelter has been a consistent sponsor of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Martha's Vineyard, The Christian Children's Fund, National Public Radio affiliate and The Vineyard House. "We are constantly improving ourselves, our services, techniques, abilities and knowledge, improving the way we do business in such a way that we

have a more positive impact on the world," he says.

While Mr. Kelley has journeyed from fetching tools for his father at age 10 to owning his own construction firm, he is still driven to learn and improve. "The next house will always be the best expression of our building philosophy: Providing the best service, the best quality, at the most reasonable price."

Every day Building Shelter perfects perfection. **vs**

If you could design your dream window, what would it be?



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