

THE ARCHITECTURE OF A MARRIAGE

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Tom has just put the finishing touches on the room in the back ell, trimming the inside of the north-facing window that overlooks Mt. Wachusett now that the leaves have fallen. He put a rounded edge on the stool, set finish nails into the casing and the apron, and filled the holes with putty the same color as the pale pine. Two coats of polyurethane won't keep the soft wood from darkening over the years, the way butter browns in a sauté pan.

Tom began work on this room in April, minutes after he'd graded his last final exam, as if screeching to a halt at the end of the school year would strip the gears spinning inside of him. And so he moved the wheelbarrow, the lawnmower, and the leftover cordwood out of the rough-finished room, dropped in a ceiling, insulated the walls, added a new window--the north-facing one--and opened the southern wall to frame a French door. He hired the sheet-rocking out, left the walls white, and installed the carpet himself. That summer he laid a brick terrace outside the French door, between the new room and my herb garden, where we can sit in the sun smelling rosemary and spicy garlic chives. He decorated the new room with six watercolors by his great aunt—flowers, a farmhouse, a seascape—the coast of Maine near Castine, and our favorite—marsh grass stacked like mushrooms in a watery green landscape. Since then

I've brought in the house plants to situate near the sunny French door: a peace lily, a dangling succulent I call a "donkey tail," and six red geraniums, still showy in November.

The new room links the main house to the "Milton Room" in the far side of the ell that Tom converted from a garage three winters ago. That project was a happy diversion from reading Paradise Lost for a course he was taking in graduate school. He's been building towards this completion for at least the last seven years of our marriage, ever since he built his workshop, the first of four outbuildings, on the far side of the stonewall that bisects our property. The completed ell has added a new dimension to our daily lives, and, by extension, to our marriage. Our focus has gone from outbuilding to inbuilding, making connections, filling in gaps, and linking our lives in the process.

Tom's and my building tradition is not without historical precedent. In the first half of the nineteenth century, New England farmers began to shift from keeping their outbuildings separate and distinct—horse stables, cow byres, pig sties, sheep sheds, hay barns, granaries—to connecting and combining these buildings under one, multi-gabled roof, thus linking houses to barns through a series of back ells. A farmer in 1850 thought little of mustering twenty teams of oxen from neighboring farms to relocate his cow byre from a field to the far side of the ell. In fact, Tom's great-great grandfather, Thomas Hastings Russell (1820-1911) began just such a project when he moved the ell from the west to the north side of the Yellow House, the family farm—still in the family, but no longer a farm. The barn burned down before Russell could connect it to the house.

Had he finished his project, this rearrangement of farm buildings—staggered and offset, yet continuous—not only would have allowed him to get to his chores without going

outside—a blessing in the throes of a New England winter—but it would have centralized work activities in the back ell, where crops and raw materials from the woodlot, fields, and barn could have been processed for home consumption and sale. The "working ell," as it was called, was the place where vegetables from the kitchen garden were pickled and canned; where bull calves, ram lambs, and young roosters were slaughtered, dressed, and prepared for meals or market; where milk from the dairy herd was churned into butter or pressed into cheese; where wool was spun into yarn, woven into cloth, and sewn into garments; where candles and quilts and soap were made. The ell provided a place where male and female activities overlapped, where husbands and wives came together in the joint effort to keep their families fed and their farms afloat.

The short growing season and the thin soil of New England dictated a mixed-farming, home-industry production system that, in turn, needed a man and a woman—usually husband and wife—to keep it running. Farm couples worked in partnerships. While the woodlot and the parlor marked the far boundaries of their domains, the ell and its adjacent dooryard marked the center, the heart of the farm, the nexus of the marriage. Interestingly, it was innovation in the woman's domain that forged the first link from house to barn. When the kitchen stove replaced the open-hearth method of cooking, the kitchen could be moved away from the central chimney in the main house. Many farmers built attached ells to accommodate their new stoves, and this kitchen became the hub of the farm's industry. In his history of New England connected farm buildings, Big House,

Little House, Back House, Barn, Thomas C. Hubka gives farm kitchens and farm wives their full due. "Work activities in the ell were primarily undertaken by farm women," he writes. "This work revolved around the kitchen, and most activities originated from, interacted with, or returned to the farm kitchen."

The allocation of work space in the extended ell shows how the male and female tasks worked towards each other. Starting from the kitchen, the woman's domain, a summer kitchen might follow, then a woodshed, a laundry room, a canning room, a dairy room, and a room for spinning and weaving. Then the man's domain might take over with a home-industry shop specializing, perhaps, in barrels, leather goods, or cider. Next might come a tool shed, a workshop, or a slaughterhouse. Closer to the barn might be a wagon or carriage shed, a stable, a small animal barn, grain and crop storage areas. The privy, everyone's domain, was always located on the north side of the ell nearest the barn.

The kitchen garden is an example of another common domain where male/female efforts combined. Frequently the man plowed the garden in the spring. Perhaps both partners planted and maintained it throughout the summer. Usually the woman harvested, cooked, preserved, and stored the produce. In this, Tom and I follow suit. We're never more contented than when we're both tending the garden. We each have our own chores. He starts our seeds in mid-winter, covering every south-facing sill in the house with his flats; he turns the soil, spring and fall, working in the compost we've accumulated; he does most of the planting, marking the rows with broken twigs and keeping a plot outline sketched on legal paper in a box full of the empty seed packets. When the young shoots crowd each other, I thin them, adding zest to early salads with mustard, arugula, and beet

greens. Then I spend hours weeding, crouched between musty tomato vines and rows of carrot tops, tugging out handfuls of the unwanted stuff, straightening stiffly every so often to admire the clean swathes I've left behind. We share the flower and fruit gardening: I plant the dahlia bulbs; Tom plants the glads; he prunes the apple trees; I bake the pies. We both harvest salad greens from May through November. We pick sugar snap peas, Swiss chard, sweet basil, summer squash, and eggplant in season. I do most of the cooking, but last summer Tom made spaghetti sauce. I found it labeled "Tom Sauce" in the freezer when I went to add green beans and raspberries to our stores. We keep acorn squash and new potatoes in the cellar. Thus when both partners contribute, New England farms get on.

Edith Wharton paints a chilling portrait of a New England farm that doesn't get on in her turn-of-the-century novel Ethan Frome. Tom encourages me to reread it for its example of New England farm architecture and marriage gone awry. Wharton's wintry tale is about gaps: gaps in the story of Ethan Frome's "smash-up"; gaps in the Frome farmhouse where the "L," as Wharton writes it, has been taken down; gaps in the Frome marriage, split asunder by the silence of too many winters in Starkfield. The gaps in the story are filled as the inquisitive narrator pieces together the ill-fated connection between Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver that smashed their hopes on the sliding hill. At the end of the novel, the gaps in the house and the marriage are left gaping.

When Wharton's narrator first lays eyes on the Frome farmhouse, he labels it "one of those New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier." On closer inspection, he realizes what's wrong: the house is missing its ell. Ethan tells the narrator,

"The house was bigger in my father's time: I had to take down the 'L,' a while back." Even the narrator, who never knew the farmhouse as a whole, feels its loss. "[I]t is certain," he muses to himself and the reader, "that the 'L' rather than the house itself seems to be the centre, the actual hearth-stone of the New England farm." The narrator sees in the Frome's diminished dwelling the image of Ethan's shrunken body, but I'd argue that the gaping farmhouse tells more about the dysfunctional marriage than its owner's crippled frame. Ethan and Zenobia Frome have no will to shape a partnership, no work-based center to link their efforts. Neither one of them is interested in keeping the farm afloat: Zenobia is too absorbed with her illnesses, real or imagined; while Ethan would rather be engineering in Florida. And so the farm is forced to function with the lopsided efforts of one uninterested man. Ethan may milk the cows, but nowhere in the novel is there any mention of cheese. After the smash-up, the farm literally limps under Ethan's crippled care. The Frome marriage collapses as the farmhouse does.

Rereading Ethan Frome, shivering once again in the frigid reaches of Wharton's barren landscape, I am reminded of my own subzero introduction to New England. Tom brought me home from our wedding festivities in California to a record-cold January in Massachusetts. The moving van that brought my trousseau couldn't get up our icy drive and had to leave my boxes at the Yellow House, where Tom's sister lived. I'm sure I felt akin to Wharton's nameless narrator—the outsider who finds himself unwillingly "anchored at Starkfield . . . for the best part of the winter"—only I intended to anchor myself in Princeton. I had more incentive to stay, for the inhospitable landscape stopped at our doorstep. Unlike the Frome farmhouse with its low, unlit passages, its ominous

staircase rising into obscurity, and its cold kitchen hearthstone, our house was designed for light and warmth.

Tom brought me home to a house he had built himself—a simple house, designed by his father and constructed by Tom in a summer, between final exams and Labor Day. Two stories. Two bedrooms. One-bath. Kitchen, dining, and living space surrounding a wood stove. An ell jutting out at right angles from the main house. Steep metal roofing. White trim against grey siding. Tom's father, Peter, was a building contractor and a self-taught architect who specialized in passive solar designs: big windows facing south to catch the winter sun's light and warmth; more windows facing east and west to channel a summer breeze through the house. Tom had modified the masculine design in preparation for my arrival by adding closet space to our bedroom and counter space in the kitchen.

I didn't realize then how much A Pattern Language, the architectural guidebook written by six Berkeley architects, had influenced Peter's and Tom's collaboration. Now, as I delve into this fat tome that encourages people to design their own environments, I admire the patterns that shape our living space. Pattern #107, "Wings of Light," warns that "buildings which displace natural light as the major source of illumination are not fit places to spend the day." Pattern #128, "Indoor Sunlight," insists that "If the right rooms are facing south, a house is bright and sunny and cheerful." Pattern #159, "Light on Two Sides of Every Room," explains that "people will always gravitate to those rooms which have light on two sides, and leave the rooms which are lit only from one side unused and empty." I love Pattern #181—"The Fire." "There is no substitute for

fire," the architects maintain. "Build the fire in a common space—perhaps in the kitchen—where it provides a natural focus for talk and dreams and thought. Adjust the location until it knits together the social spaces and rooms around it, giving them each a glimpse of the fire; and make a window or some other focus to sustain the place during the times when the fire is out." The swatches of sunlight that spangle the white walls and wood floors of our house, the warmth and cheer and illumination this light brings, the heat that radiates from the woodstove in January—all are tributes to the authors of A Pattern Language, to Peter's vision, and to Tom's construction.

Peter and Tom also followed A Pattern Language's advice to young couples.

The six architects emphasize the vital role that the evolution of a house plays in the evolution of a marriage. They warn newlyweds against starting with a "dream house" from scratch, suggesting instead that a couple find or build a house that they can change gradually over the years: "Improving the house, fixing it up, enlarging it, provides a frame for learning about one another: it brings out conflict, and offers the chance, like almost no other activity, for concrete resolution and growth. . . . The experience of making simple changes in the house, and tuning it to their lives, provides some grist for their own growth."

Unlike the Fromes, who started with a New England farmhouse connected to the cow barn, then dismantled it as hope for their marriage froze, Tom and I started small, with a modest house and six plus acres for expansion. I like to think that our subsequent building projects have added grist to our growth as a couple, that we've resolved conflicts

with two-by-four construction, ship-lap pine, window casings, and metal roofing. I know that hammering nails together strengthens us as partners in this joint endeavor.

The workshop was the first building we added to our property, and my first experience hammering nails. It's in line with the ell, but on the other side of the stone wall—separate and distinct—yet reflecting the same architectural patterns: the same shed roof, the same cornice work, the same wide windows facing south. It was Tom's space originally, his domain, as the barn was the domain of those nineteenth-century farmers. After twenty some years of teaching English, Tom had quit to become a carpenter. He needed a place to store his tools, room to run his table saw, and wall space for his workbench. He added an office to the far side of the shop—a refuge, a retreat, a room of his own. I have a picture of him sitting in the finished room, papers spread out on a table before him, a homemade lamp cocked over his head. On the table are tools of the trade he couldn't quite give up: a manual typewriter, a dictionary bound in duct tape, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. On the wall hangs a poster of a Russian tile, a reminder of the years he'd spent teaching Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. Light slants in from a stained-glass window and a wood stove squats behind him.

Looking at the picture, I'm thrown back to Ethan Frome. The farmer who wished he were an engineer created a similar retreat for himself when his father's illness forced him to abort his studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and return home to Starkfield. Perhaps as a consolation, his mother gave him a small room behind the best parlor for his own: “Here he had nailed up shelves for his books, built himself a box-sofa out of boards

and a mattress, laid out his papers on a kitchen-table, hung on the rough plaster wall an engraving of Abraham Lincoln and a calendar with ‘Thoughts from the Poets.’”

It was the New England winter and Siren songs that sabotaged both Ethan's and Tom's getaways. Neither could keep their rooms warm enough to inhabit from December through March. Ethan gave his stove and his heart to Mattie Silver who, in turn, provided him with warmth of a different kind. Tom, in the midst of a new career in construction, didn't have the time or the energy or the incentive to fire up the stove in his winter retreat. What he did have was a wife in the main house keeping that hearthstone hot.

It was winter, in a way, that sabotaged Tom's carpentry career as well. When an icy rafter slipped from two co-workers' hands, fell through an attic and two empty floors, and gouged a chunk out of the concrete between his feet, Tom quit carpentering for a living and began applying to Ph.D. programs in English. He was halfway through this coursework when Milton inspired him to transform the garage into another retreat, this one closer and connected to the house at the far side of the ell. Meanwhile I had commandeered Tom's office in the shop to use as an art studio and spent a summer sketching my way through the exercises in Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain. I remember sitting at Peter's drawing table, swiveling on his stool and pondering the geometry of a pine cone. I try not to remember the series of self portraits I drew—full-face and three-quarter views, with and without hats—each one more gruesome than the one before, all of them unrecognizable.

The Milton Room is lovely, with windows on, not two, but three sides, the south-facing one as wide as the garage door it replaced. We bought a new Franklin stove

for the room—more romantic than a box stove, more functional than a fireplace—and placed it to provide a focus for talk and thought and dreams. We filled a bookcase with Tom's Irish literature and my collections of essays, and topped it with vases he brought home from Turkey and a pen-and-ink drawing I did of rooftops in County Galway. We moved the futon couch out there and invited guests to stay. But once again winter, the most imposing character in Wharton's Ethan Frome, undid us. The Milton Room was still too far from the house, separated by the drafty wood room, and too hard to heat after a long day of teaching. One or the other of us lit the fire and graded papers out there on sporadic weekends, then we stopped using the room at all until April.

That spring we decided to get sheep to help reclaim the pastures we were clearing on our property, and we built our second outbuilding—a sheep shed at the far side of the shop. It follows the shop's same lines—the same steep ascent, the same sharp angles—but in miniature. We bought Jackie and Rose from a neighboring farmer and I took over their care and feeding. Suddenly I, who had never felt the need to create spaces for myself—I'm the one who grades papers on the kitchen table, who reads books in the middle of the living room, who neglects to close the bathroom door more often than not—suddenly I had a place of my own. The sheep shed and their pastures became my domain and I relished my new role as caretaker. I had a new set of chores: measuring grain, dispensing hay, mucking out, moving fences, liming, seeding, and fertilizing pastures. I thought mid-winter would daunt me, but it didn't. I was eager to get outside for the 6:00

a.m. feeding. While the sheep ate their grain, I stamped my boots in the snow, counted the stars, and watched the sun rise—"A Ribbon at a time"—through bare limbed trees along the horizon.

I invaded Tom's shop again, this time with the tools of my trade: pitchfork, shovel, wheelbarrow, spreader. Tom moved his table saw to make room for my bales of hay and I filled barrels with feed next to his workbench. Unfortunately for Tom, I didn't stop with the sheep. One summer I kept a baby raccoon in his abandoned office. There I taught it to lap milk, eat baby food, and use a litter box. One winter I kept painted turtles in our bathroom. When I released them in Rocky Mason's pond the next spring, I moved the empty aquarium out to sit next to Tom's grindstone. Another spring I brooded six guinea fowl under the workbench, first in a cardboard box, then, as they grew, in a coop made of chicken wire, a constant light keeping the little keets warm. Finally I bought a donkey to guard the sheep and added his gear to my gear in the shop.

The order Tom had created for himself in his workshop—levels hung level on the wall, chisels lining the back of the workbench, extension cords coiled from the crossbeam, coffee cans full of nails on the shelves—was infused with a zoological atmosphere—loose hay underfoot, sweet feed spilling over the workbench, and the acrid smell of bird droppings in the air. I was adding grist to our marriage, the grainy kind, but I doubt that Tom thought it was turning to his advantage.

It was about the time I brought the keets home, peeping in a shoe box, that Tom started finishing the wood room in the back ell. Perhaps it was in self-defense. As soon as he'd hung the last Aunt Abby in the new room, he went out and built a new woodshed on

the other side of the house, a replica of the sheep shed, with a steep roof and an open door facing south. Then I talked him into expanding my domain. It was my promise to vacate his workshop that encouraged Tom to get out the post-hole diggers. As I tied my carpenter's belt around my waist, slung a hammer from its loop, and filled the pockets with nails, I had a full-fledged barn in mind, with a hayloft, box stalls, tack and feed rooms. We built a simple addition to the sheep shed instead. Now I store my gear in what I call "the barn" anyway—hay, grain, and feed buckets, a donkey cart, a pitchfork propped against the wheelbarrow. I've fixed it up the way I remember the horse barns of my childhood, and nostalgia entangles me whenever I swing open the half door. Tom has his shop back, too, swept clean of hay and smelling of sawdust, the table saw, once again, in its place.

The office has never been fully restored. It's become a repository of old furniture and the cast-off accouterments of our lives: an accordion file alphabetizes Tom's contracting career; cardboard boxes hold his high-school teaching folders; a wooden sea chest with rusty metal strapping stores I don't know what. My portfolio leans against it, full of grim portraits of a person I'm glad I don't recognize. I've abandoned the electric typewriter I wrote my college papers on out there; the sewing machine I bought used from a Home Economics teacher; six boxes of wool, picked clean but not washed yet. We still use the camping gear—the ice chest, the kerosene stove, the skillet and saucepans, the plastic plates and battered silverware—but, perhaps, not for much longer.

Tom has moved Peter's drawing table into the Milton Room where he's designing a cottage we plan to build in Maine next summer, in Brooksville, on Smith Cove, where the Bagaduce River empties into Penobscot Bay and where Tom has summered since his childhood. Perhaps now that we've knit together our lives here in Princeton—connecting the rooms that we share in the ell, establishing the domains that we keep separate across the stone wall—we're ready to build the ultimate outbuiding a five-hour drive from our doorstep. Tom's gotten out the plans that Peter drew for this house and he refers to them often. I'm rereading A Pattern Language, racing out to the drawing table, book in hand, with yet another idea; not all of them are well received. We battled for days over Pattern #138, "Sleeping to the East." Tom wanted to build a staircase where the six architects and I thought a window should be. "Give those parts of the house where people sleep," the book says, "an eastern orientation, so that they wake up with the sun and light." When I check the plans a week later, I notice that the staircase has disappeared and our bedroom window opens to the rising sun.