



Burlington's Architectural Gems

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WISNIEWSKI

Rome has a world famous, must-see architecture list certified by throngs of visitors. Reproductions of each building in glass snow globes available for purchase on any street corner.

Burlington doesn't have eye-popping, world renowned monuments, but it does have a strong dose of what the Romans call genius loci: where the buildings and landscape together express a spirit unique to a single place.

I have eight snow globes from eight Italian cities in my living room. When I touch one, I feel this genius loci; I see history, light, people, food, and drink distilled into a little glass talisman. Here then is my attempt to impart the genius loci of Burlington.

Billings Library

I was passing through town in 1979, planning to move to Boston, when I saw the H. H. Richardson Building. From that moment on, Billings Library is the structure I think of first as defining Burlington architecture.

Henry Hobson Richardson was America's original star architect. He was a big man of immense appetites who wore a monk's habit. In 1888, the year of his death, he completed the library for the University of Vermont.

Billings is positively medieval in contrast to the other buildings that define the UVM green—Williams, Ira Allen and Old Mill—quintessential New England structures of simple rectangular form, tall and proud but not ostentatious. HHR was the main proponent of a brief Romanesque revival that swept the growing nation. Billings' random ashlar stonework doesn't sit on the earth but rather rises fully formed with a front door recessed in the shadow of an arch. It exudes power and yet is looser, more relaxed than its brethren.

But for all its medieval romance, it is a rational structure, foreshadowing the coming age of modernism. Inside to the left is a box to hold books, to the right, a grand reading room. The center entry deals with circulation and public functions, culminating around the massive fireplace. The space is heroic yet intimate, hushed yet lively, all parts unified by an insistent horizontal belt of stone.

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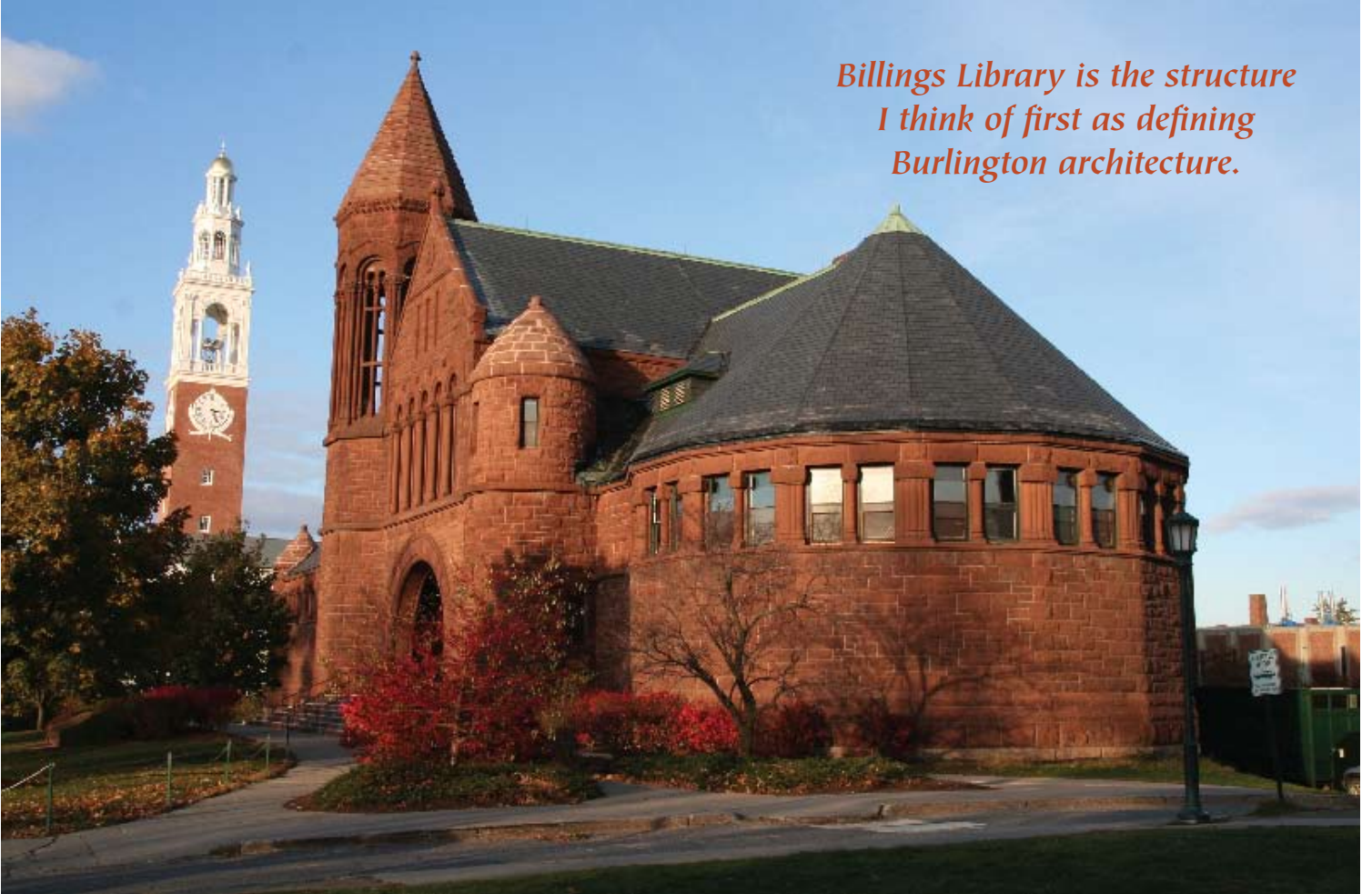
Follett House

By 1979, the Follett House, dressed in battleship gray paint with drooping trim, had attained a kind of noble invisibility. I thought it abandoned, but evening hints of neon, music, and cigarette smoke indicated an active VFW post. After a major fire in 1981, the Pomerleau Agency, a real-estate firm, rejuvenated the space as its headquarters.

Timothy Follett built the Greek revival house in 1841 with proceeds from his shipping, trading, and lumber empire. The architect, Ammi B. Young, gave the handsome structure its fine proportions and monumental Ionic columns. The double brick pilasters at the corner create a rhythm and transition between solid mass and portico void, while the iron balcony adds a touch of the delicate.

The whiteness of the structure cannot be ignored. At that time, only the wealthy could afford to import pure white pigments. Regular folk used ochers, reds, and browns derived locally. White was an expression of means as well as a direct connection to classical roots.

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Whether temple or mansion, the monumental portico is the first thing a visitor sees, a gesture to welcome and impress. The entry facades of the Follett House are quiet and modest; the grand portico is in the back, indicating that the true intent of this building is to command an entire landscape, from rolling lawn to the lake and beyond.

Even today, a visitor scanning the city for the first time from the lake is drawn to the pure form and gleaming white of the Follett House—a shining temple on the hill.

Oasis Diner

The Oasis Diner seems a curious choice, because it feels so . . . temporary, as though it could be towed away at any minute, and it very well could, as it was originally towed to the site, a former laundry, in 1954. Since then, three generations of

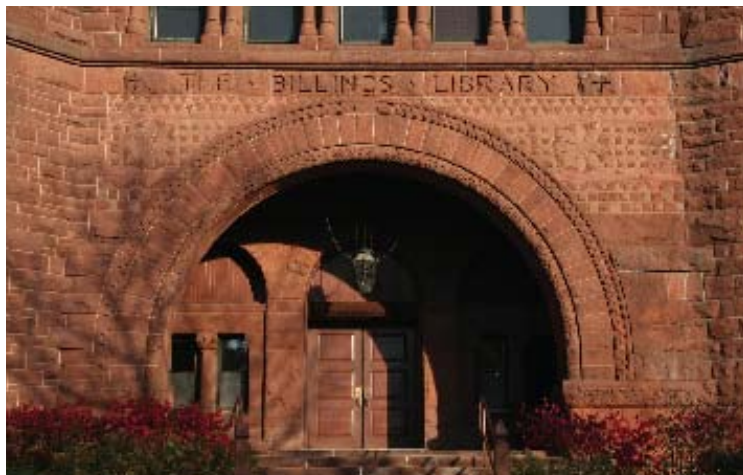
the Lines family dished out uncounted meals to the regular and famous alike, including President Bill Clinton.

Standard rules of urban design assert that coherent streetscapes are created when adjacent buildings are similar in massing, scale, materials, and details. How does the Oasis break all those rules and still pull it off with panache?

Sometimes contrast works. A large church in a neighborhood of modest houses is a positive contrast; it becomes a focal point. The Oasis flips the relationship; it is small and silver amidst larger, darker buildings. They are right angles and vertical, solid walls; the Oasis is curved corners, transparent, flowing, horizontal lines, and movement. The counters on the inside continue the theme, a surface with an old Formica pattern covered with softly curved boomerangs.

Most buildings have a disconnect between their outside and inside—one has to consciously cross a threshold. Whether the exterior is brick, wood or vinyl, the interior is something else: Sheetrock, paint, wall coverings. The Oasis is stainless steel inside and out and feels machined from a single block of material. This blurring of outside and inside is very modern, very inviting.

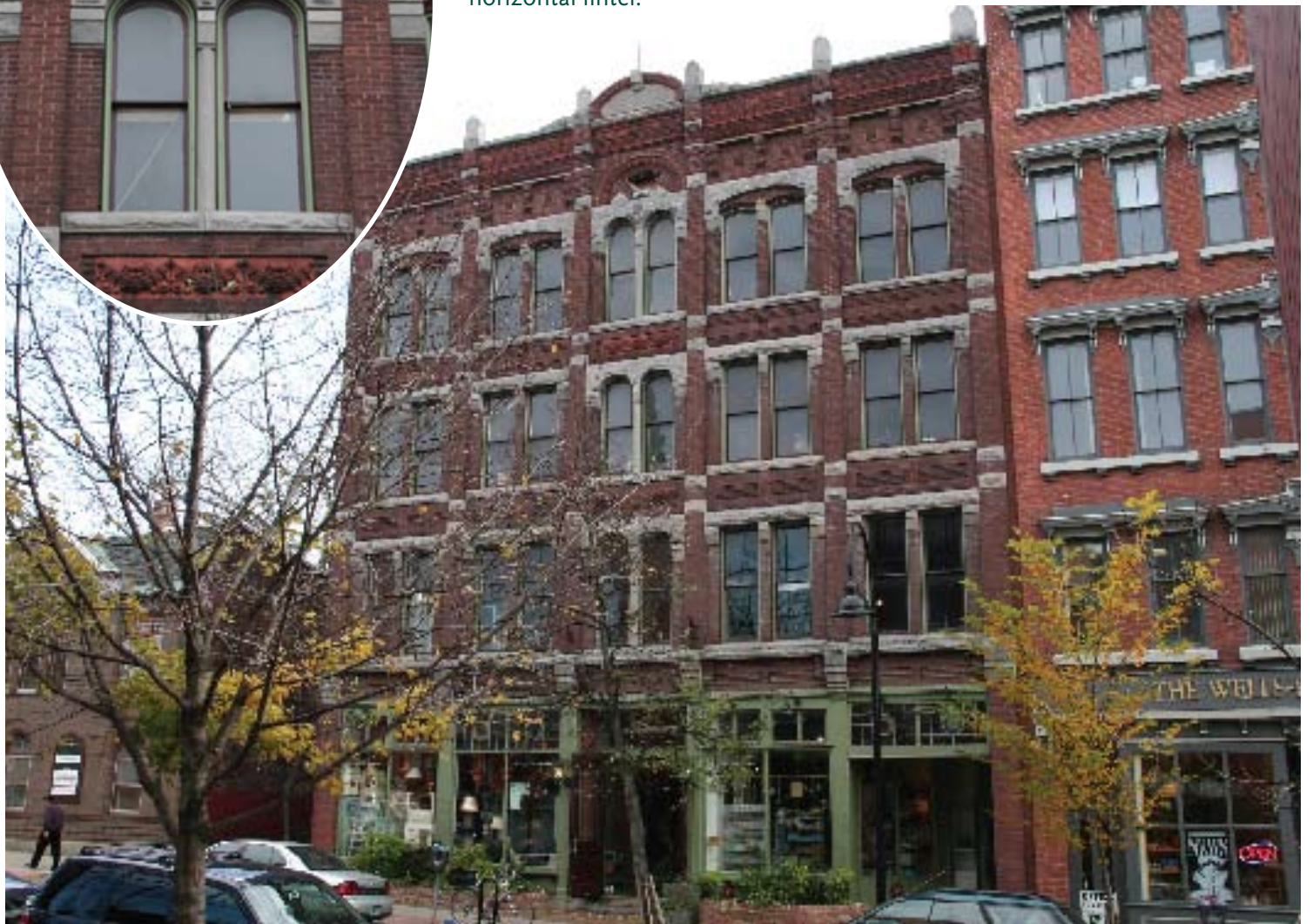
The Oasis, which is under new ownership, also has a new name, Sadie Katz. ➤ 34



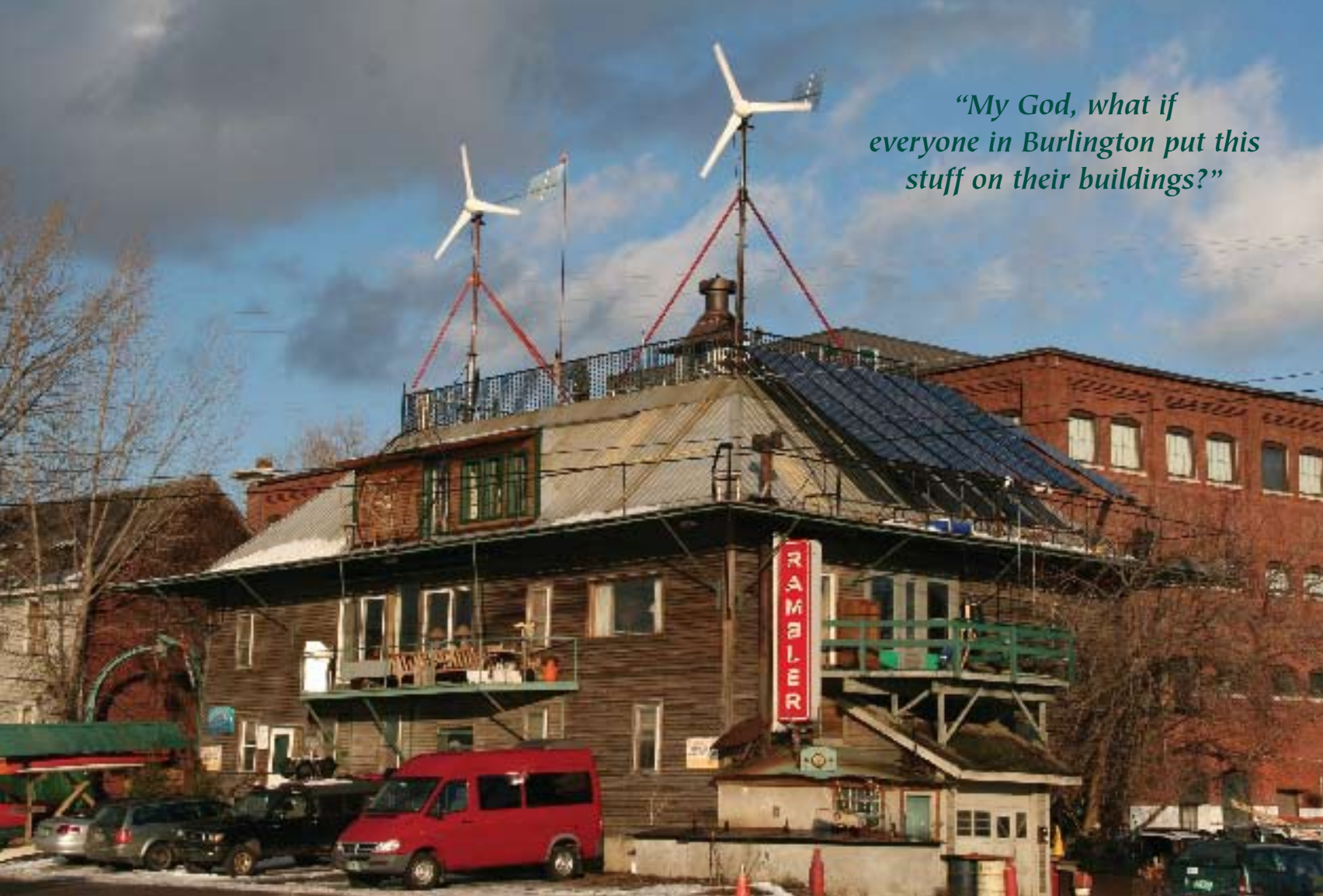
Above: The grand reading room at Billings Library.
Left: Central to Richardson's look are curving arches,
red stonework, and recessed entry ways.



Above and right: Stainless steel inside and out, the Oasis Diner contrasts with its neighbors.
Below and left: The Wells-Richardson building, now Bennington Potters, with detail of a recessed horizontal lintel.



“My God, what if everyone in Burlington put this stuff on their buildings?”



The Waterfront’s Rambler building is a whimsical hodgepodge of eclectic construction.

Bennington Potters/Wells-Richardson Historical District

Not long after the Civil War, if you had a hankering to feel better, you might order some Paine’s Celery Compound from Wells-Richardson Company, or perhaps some other patent medicine, drug, dye, or butter coloring from the Burlington empire built up from a small drug wholesale company by the dynamic William Wells, who opened branch offices in London and Australia.

The headquarters building of WRC, at 127 College Street, now Bennington Potters, was completed in 1883. One of the finest examples of commercial architecture in Burlington, with qualities that set it apart from the typical commercial structure, it is part of an entire block officially designated the Wells-Richardson Historic District.

Vertical piers extend from the ground, where they are gathered into the storefront vocabulary, up to granite finials shooting past the top cornice to the sky. The recessed horizontal lintels consist of brick, granite and terra cotta in a riot of detail. Instead of a box floating over a storefront, this is a unified frame, with a vertical bias; the ground and upper stories are locked into a single composition.

The lintels are both straight and arched; most window dividers are brick; the central bay is stone. All this and more add up to a very dynamic and rhythmic composition.

Beside the visual stimulation, this building also anticipates the steel frame designs and terra cotta details, about to be invented in Chicago, which ushered in modernism and eventually led to the skyscraper.

Genius loci for Non-geniuses

Ashlar: Stone cut thin for a building’s facing

Cornice: The crown or top layer of an architectural composition

Lintel: The horizontal member that usually carries the load above a window or door

Pilaster: A vertical member that looks like a column but is integrated in a wall

Portico: The entry space created by columns supporting a roof

Sheetrock: Wallboard made of processed gypsum for covering interior walls

The Rambler Building

The Rambler Building is tucked out of sight at 216 Battery Street, south of Maple Street along the waterfront. Once it was a flat roofed, Railway Express Agency terminal connected to the adjacent railroad, but since 1979, Harry Atkinson and Lisa Marchetti have slowly transformed the building. Six to eight work studios are housed there, and the building looks less like a solid structure than a constantly morphing collage of unrelated bits and pieces that come together into an improbable whole.


When they added a new roof, the steel structure was formed from recycled boiler piping. The railing on the roof terrace is made from hunks of welded chain and various parts of heating and mechanical equipment. A vegetable-oil-fired central boiler handles the heat, while a bank of solar photovoltaic cells and two windmills supply more than half of the building's electrical power.

The southwest corner sports the Rambler sign, which calls forth memories of my grandfather's green 1957 coupe, and the stair to the roof is crowned with an old barn ventilator. Some siding is wood, some metal, and steel stairs and balconies encrust the exterior. On the interior, rafters are insulated with built up layers of old carpet. The whole thing has a kind of irrepressible energy and joy to it. Style and form are not chosen, they evolve.


Given the relaxed progress, I hesitated to ask about permits. Atkinson said they had permits for everything and that they've received only one complaint. One man said, "My God, what if everyone in Burlington put this stuff on their buildings?"

Michael Wisniewski, a Cornell University-educated architect, brings his interests in history, mythology, literature, poetry, art, and anything quietly quirky to work grounded in vernacular forms. His most visible buildings are the Interstate Rest Areas near Williston, Vt.

Duncan-Wisniewski Architecture designs small and large projects concentrated in the northern half of Vermont. They undertake a large variety of building types but have a special commitment to affordable housing and sustainable neighborhoods.




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