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Burlington architects Bob Duncan (left) and Michael Wisniewski formed their partnership, Duncan-Wisniewski, with the intention of keeping it small and keeping things simple.

## The Long-Rangers

**Bob Duncan and Michael Wisniewski consider the future in every design they create**

by Rosalyn Graham

How is an architect different from a lawyer? No, this isn't another lawyer joke; it's a question that Michael Wisniewski asks as he explains what he says is a cornerstone of the architect's role in society. A lawyer, or an accountant, is just supposed to serve the interests of the client, he says. "As architects we have a different stewardship than that. We also have a responsibility to the greater community not just to satisfy the client's needs but to create patterns in the surrounding community that will make the community better."

Wisniewski's partner in the Burlington architectural firm of Duncan-Wisniewski, Bob Duncan echoes that philosophy. "We strive to do the best we can with the client's money, their goals, their plans, but we also hope to inspire them to do more, to put a better face forward to the community or address some other need at the same time for example, to create a certain number of housing units but also create a sense of community."

Two projects the partners are working on for the Burlington Community Land Trust illustrate their blending of a social purpose, good design, a sense of place and reverence for the site and the community.

Duncan is taking the lead on Il Quattro, a four-plex being constructed on North Champlain Street to provide four units of affordable housing. It is a small building on a tight little site and it blends into its neighborhood, with a name that honors the original Italian owners of the property in a largely Italian district. When completed in mid-May, it will have met a need for housing, revitalized its small piece of North Champlain Street, and reminded the neighbors of their history.

Just a few blocks away, Wisniewski is leading the design of a building that will have a commercial tenant on the main floor and eight units of affordable housing on two upper floors.



**Il Quattro, a four-plex being built on North Champlain Street to provide affordable housing, was named by Bob Duncan to honor the original Italian owners of the property in the largely Italian district where it is sited.**

Located at the corner of North Avenue and North Street, the building will mark the gateway to the Old North End neighborhood, and Wisniewski is hoping that the building's unusual shape, somewhat ship-like to fit the angle of the intersection, its location overlooking Burlington's waterfront, and its name, "The Mermaid House," will ensure that it fits that figurehead role.

He hopes he can work with local historians, neighbors and artists to unearth the stories of the site and embody them in a sculpture to decorate the building. They already know stories of an early burying ground, an old coffee pot factory, a Shell service station and, most recently, a deli.

Not every project they undertake has mystery and history, but every one calls on the architect's ability to bring many aspects of the project into a cohesive whole.

As Wisniewski says, "A lot of people approach a project in a linear way, but the real value of an architect is that we're not linear. We simultaneously look at all the elements, including the site and its strengths and limitations the number of units to be built or people to be accommodated, the size of the budget, the history and we juggle them and try to knit them together in a harmonious whole."

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Duncan and Wisniewski have been juggling and knitting (and designing and advising) together since 1984. Each had gone out on his own after having known each other as co-workers in the architectural offices of Colin P. Lindbergh. The decision to form a partnership came as each became busy enough that the prospect of having a partner to share the work was appealing.

"Right from the beginning, we knew we didn't want to become a big business," Wisniewski remembers. "We knew we wanted to keep it small, keep it simple. What we value is our interactions with people, and Bob and I both felt like if we grow the business and suddenly we have 15 or 20 people working for us then we are just going to be managers."

That early conviction has not changed, and today, in their office on South Champlain Street, they work with two associates, Tim Mullen and Phil Colteryahn, trained architects with degrees who are doing the documenting, course work and examinations to become licensed.

Another early decision reflected their shared commitment to socially responsible architecture. Their first project as partners was a condominium project in Stowe, followed by second-home projects. "It was enjoyable, but we both realized we wanted to move the firm in a direction where we wouldn't only be working for rich people," Duncan remembers. "We both have progressive social interests and we started working for nonprofits."

The partners' first project in the nonprofit world was the Wilson Hotel for Sister Lucille Bonvouloir at COTS. Today, 60 to 70 percent of their work is for nonprofits, although they have done numerous public buildings, private homes, commercial and industrial buildings, medical and health facilities, and recreational buildings.

Affordable housing projects, be they new housing, adaptive and renovated housing or special program housing, fill many pages of their list of accomplishments in their almost 20 years. One of their earliest projects was a two-phase renovation of 32 units of affordable housing in historic buildings at Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester. One of their most recent is 18 units of housing in nine duplexes clustered around a common green in Shelburne.



**Michael Wisniewski stands before The Mermaid House, a building with a ship-like shape marking the gateway to Burlington's Old North End.**

Liz Curry, a consultant to Lake Champlain Housing Development Corp., which is developing the Shelburne project in cooperation with an interfaith community group, likes working with them. "What is so wonderful about their design is that it creates a coherent community as soon as people move in," she says. "The duplex design gives residents more breathing room, a feeling of their own home. It's a neighborhood where kids can play and parents can watch right out the window."

Besides Lake Champlain Housing, Duncan and Wisniewski have worked with many other nonprofits that focus on affordable housing: Housing Vermont, Cathedral Square, Lamoille Housing Partnership, Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity, COTS, the YWCA of Vermont and the Burlington Community Land Trust.

Wisniewski says there is a lot of satisfaction in designing affordable housing projects.

"It's a segment of our society that's ignored by the typical financial structures of society. A private developer does not usually do affordable housing because they crunch the numbers and they can't make any money. It's not that they are greedy and want to make a lot of money, they just can't make it work, so these nonprofits have stepped up to find ways of swinging funding to make projects affordable, to address a segment of society that needs help. That's something that both of us feel good about."

Duncan lists three community-oriented projects as the most interesting and most challenging he has done: the Park Place Cooperative Housing project across from City Hall Park in Burlington, the Swanton School and Ruggles House.

At Park Place, he was faced with the challenge of renovating a historic hotel, badly damaged by fire and generally run-down, into commercial space and affordable housing. The National Park Service, which oversees all historic preservation projects (and administers the historic tax credits on which renovation projects may depend), was becoming increasingly concerned about interior renovation work. "It was my first exposure to them being more concerned about the inside of the building," Duncan recalls. "Since it had been a hotel, they decided it was important to preserve the historic corridors. It didn't make the most sense for the unit layout, so we had to find a way to maintain those features."

At the Swanton School, a historic, classic, two-story building abandoned as a center for education in the town, was converted to accommodate 16 units of elderly housing, a health center, a senior center, a youth center and a Meals on Wheels site.

Ruggles House in Burlington was a retirement facility that needed to add units to be financially viable, but faced serious limitations on expansion on the site.

At both projects Duncan met challenges from the Park Service with guidelines that did not make sense in the Vermont setting, such as rules against insulating brick walls. "We're up here in Vermont telling people, 'You're 80 years old but somebody in Washington says we can't insulate that wall, so if you're a little bit chilly or if it's drafty, don't stand too close to the walls.'"

Wisniewski's most challenging and personally most interesting project was the recently completed Williston Information Area, opened in 2002 to provide washroom facilities and travel information to people driving on Interstate 89. "It was a long process with a lot of people involved in making the decision," Wisniewski says. "The challenge was how to maintain the integrity of the design with so many committees and people involved."

The discussion in the early stages of planning centered on how to make something that really communicates what Vermont is about. The dream was that it would be more than just bathrooms, but a true information center with products and images that would tempt people to get off the Interstate.

Wisniewski combined the need for a big, dramatic room where things could be displayed with the image of the many barns he saw along I-89. He says the building's design harks back to the past and the agricultural history of the Champlain Valley, yet doesn't copy the past, but points to the future.

In all their projects, Duncan and Wisniewski bring practical, hands-on experience that enhances their understanding of the whole construction process. Duncan's father was a mason with his own construction company in Barre. Duncan worked with him while in high school and during college. He went to Penn State and graduated in 1974 with a bachelor of architecture. He came back to Vermont for the summer, got a "summer" job with Colin Lindbergh that lasted for nine years, and has been in Vermont ever since.

Wisniewski, a native of Buffalo, N.Y., had finished two years studying psychology at Cornell when he quit, hitchhiked across the country and settled down to be a carpenter in Salt Lake City. "I remembered that when I was at Cornell I had all these friends who were in architecture school and I'd go over to visit them every night to play guitar and they'd be building models of things and it looked like a lot of fun," Wisniewski says. "Combining the construction experience with the illusion that being an architect was a lot of fun, I went back to Cornell and started all over to get a bachelor of architecture."



**Duncan-Wisniewski associates Tim Mullen (left) and Phil Colteryahn are trained architects with degrees doing the documenting, course work and examinations to become licensed.**

When he graduated in 1979, he headed to Boston for two job interviews. He stopped to visit friends in Burlington and found a city that felt right to him: as great a place to live as Ithaca where he had been living, but with more potential. In the next few years he worked for many local architects including David Luce, Louis Mannie Lionni, Roland Batten and Colin Lindberg.

Duncan says, "Having both had real construction experience, we appreciate the hard work involved in the construction of a building, and we understand, in a way some other architects may not, how things go together."

"The feedback we get from clients and contractors we work with is that we seem to have a real grasp of the whole process," Wisniewski says. "Not just how to design the building, but the process from their point of view."

Curry has worked with Duncan and Wisniewski on several projects for Lake Champlain Housing and has been impressed both with their designs and their talent for shepherding the project through the permitting process.

"When you ask them for a design, they hit on something that is so appropriate right off the bat for the site," she says. "Not only do they have a wonderful vision but they know, perhaps better than anyone I've ever worked with, how to implement it; how to get it built."

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