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WOODSTOCK

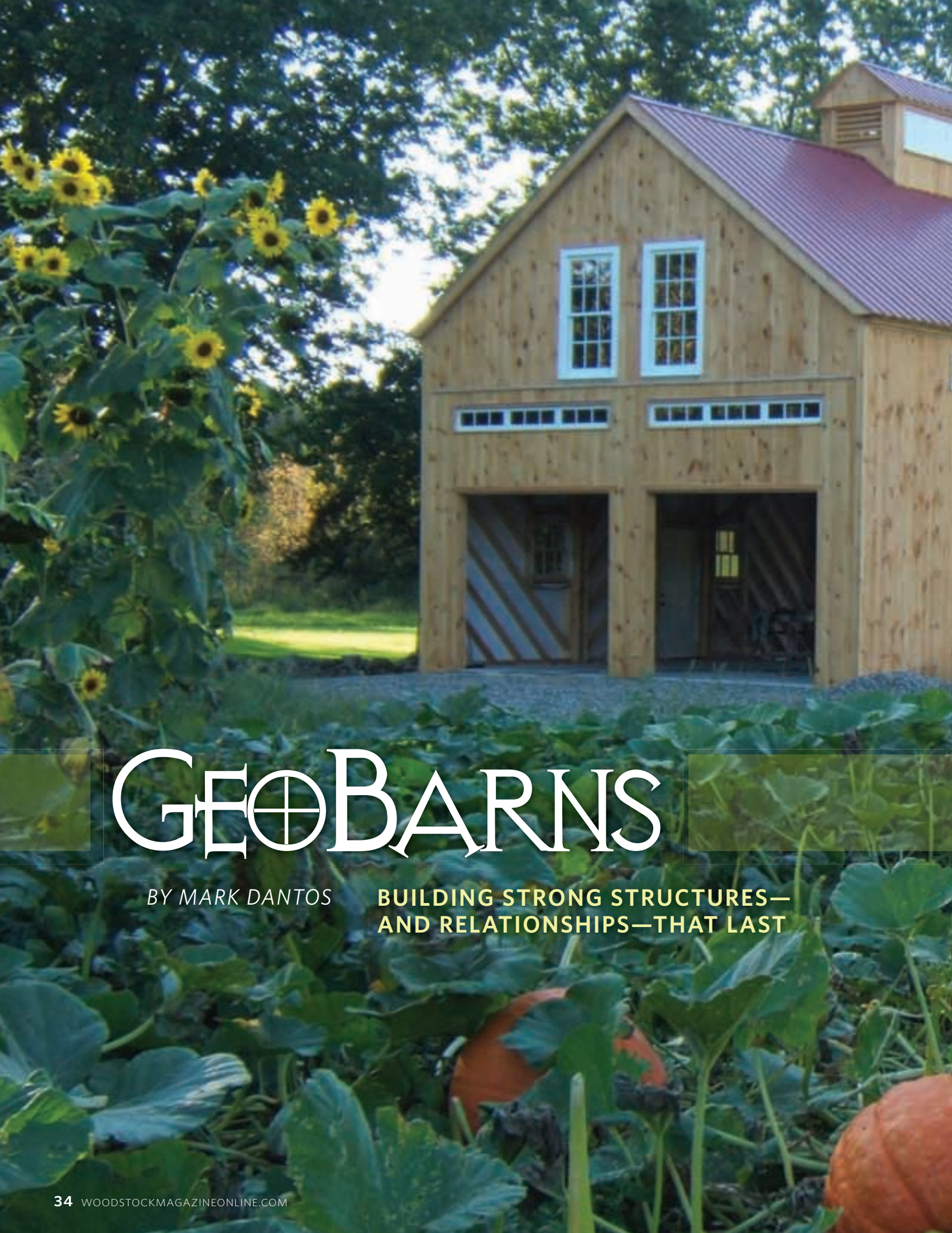
magazine

Autumn Color

**BUILDING WITH
GEOBARNs**

**STUDENTS IN
GUATEMALA**

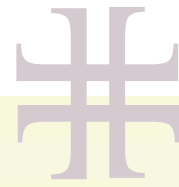
**BILLINGS FARM
IN THE 1890s**



GE⊕BARNs

BY MARK DANTOS

**BUILDING STRONG STRUCTURES—
AND RELATIONSHIPS—THAT LAST**



The “eureka moment” came around midnight on a Tuesday one March. George Abetti was racking his brain on how to lower the cost of the barns he was building. That’s when it hit him. Thinking outside the box, he realized he could simultaneously achieve form and function, strength and beauty—for less money and with less waste. »



Left: A 150-acre farm in Cambridge, New York, features a GeoBarns workshop.

Inset: Kitchen in a Maine coastal home.



Top: Maine coastal home with matching garage.

Bottom: Grantham, New Hampshire, GeoBarn framing.

The Geobarn was born that night, and nearly 20 years later, its niche in the design-and-build industry remains solid. While the methods Abetti settled upon are not totally original, they're still somewhat unique in the construction industry. And in the capable hands of Abetti, they have yielded some stunning structures in the Upper Valley and beyond.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

According to the firm's promotional materials, the product combines "modified post-and-beam timber construction with diagonal framing and open-span truss systems without any internal support." But the technical approach is only part of what sets GeoBarns apart from its competition. "Having a good product is not enough," Abetti notes from his home office in White River Junction, Vermont. In fact, it's the human touch that's helped make GeoBarns successful. Abetti recognizes that commissioning a structure in which to live or work may be the most important capital

GeoBarn porches are suspended from the roof.

and emotional expenditure his clients undertake. That's why developing a "sacred trust" with customers is vital.

A graduate of Yale University with an English literature major, Abetti earned an advanced counseling degree prior to his former career with the Bradford, Vermont, school district. He uses his communication skills collaborating with clients during the crucial planning and design process. First, Abetti visits the site to consider the position of the barn and then brainstorms with his customers about its ultimate purpose. "I ask a lot of invasive questions about hobbies, pets, and lifestyle," he says. "I ask people to think telescopically."

How might we design a room around a piano? Are aging parents part of the equation? Will you be having children? Such lines of questioning allow Abetti and his clients to envision a structure designed around its current and future function. From there, the finished barn can showcase



Commercial nursery and farmers' market in Westborough, Massachusetts.

the Steinway or serve as living quarters for the in-laws. Thanks to an open floor plan and super-strong support system in which “everything is going back into the sills,” some clients use their GeoBarn to garage and maintain their boat or specialty car—even on an upper level.

THE RIGHT PRICE

Aside from the design flexibility, the company owes some of its market share to its price point. Since straight post-and-beam construction is labor intensive, it’s often priced out of the market,

Abetti explains. In addition, competitors rely so heavily on standardized materials that building custom-sized barns becomes difficult and more costly. A GeoBarn can cost up to half of what a traditional post-and-beam structure might, Abetti says. “We’re tough to compete with economically.”

The 60-year-old president and general manager of GeoBarns is also entirely transparent when it comes to his quotes. “I’m really open about money,” he says. “[My clients] know how much I’ll make.” He says he aims for a 20 percent profit



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Top: Interior of home on Carlton Hill, Woodstock.

Bottom: Commercial recording studio near Paconic Parkway in upstate New York.

margin, but will sacrifice some of that in order to keep his projects on time and on budget.

As a younger man, Abetti always enjoyed working with his hands. And while he built his first GeoBarn in the early 1990s, it wasn't until 2002 that he made the complete transition and took on this design and build company full time. He built a website (www.GeoBarns.com) and the business started to take off. About half of his clients first learn of the product from the Internet. To date, he's built more than 100 buildings in New England, New York, and the mid-Atlantic states and Canada, with 20 more projects in the pipeline.

CONNECTED TO THE LAND

But if business is good, Abetti, the father of six grown children, just believes it's his way of serving others, and God. A former pastor in Arizona and then in Vermont, he says his passion for this work is a blessing. "God has been good to me," he says. And in return, it's his responsibility to steward

his clients' resources, starting with their money.

For instance, Abetti and his crew use the Pythagorean Theorem and "run calculations all day" to minimize waste on the job site. As a result, discarded materials typically amount to less than one half of one percent of the total materials used. One client in Connecticut gushed that, from 20,000 pounds of material used to build her barn, the entire waste pile fit in two wheelbarrow loads.

The company exercises stewardship of the earth's resources as well. For example, GeoBarns favors borate-treated lumber instead of standard pressure-treated lumber and its toxic chemicals. The firm also chooses lumber suppliers that engage in sustainable forest management practices.

These practices may appeal to some prospective customers. Abetti adds that some of his business has come amidst a growing social movement away from excessive consumption toward a simpler life. "As a society, we have become rootless," he states. In



Current project on Howe Hill in Sharon, Vermont.

our pursuit of money, “we’ve lost a lot of sense of community and our connection to the land.” But clients who build a GeoBarn are making a statement about how they want to live, he continues. The building experience and the end product offer a way to reconnect to community and our agrarian roots. “Barns represent what we’ve lost and what we yearn for as a society.”

In fact, the building process is almost like an Amish barn raising. “We invite all our clients to be part of our crew,” Abetti explains. “Some think it’s crazy.” And while the foreman typically lives in his recreational vehicle on the work site, his handpicked crew (Abetti hires individuals “based on a personal relationship and trains them to be carpenters”) often eats and sleeps in the clients’ main home. »

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George Abetti in his element: he feels lucky that as a design builder, he gets to translate a sketch into a home, physically creating what he puts on paper.

The partners become like family as the barn goes up—usually in just several weeks. And the relationships forged last long after the final nail is sunk.

Abetti says he works and lives for these personal relationships and the testimonials they generate, many of which are published on his website. One customer's reflections on his experience with Abetti and GeoBarns perhaps best encapsulates the business' mission: "On the day that my crew packed up their tools to leave, I found myself feeling a bit sad, for one never welcomes the end of a wonderful experience," said the client. "The sadness has been replaced with joy, however. Long from now, when I am gone, this barn will remain as a testament to the potential creative beauty of mankind, and to the potential purity that can exist within human relationships." ^W

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