

Custom Home

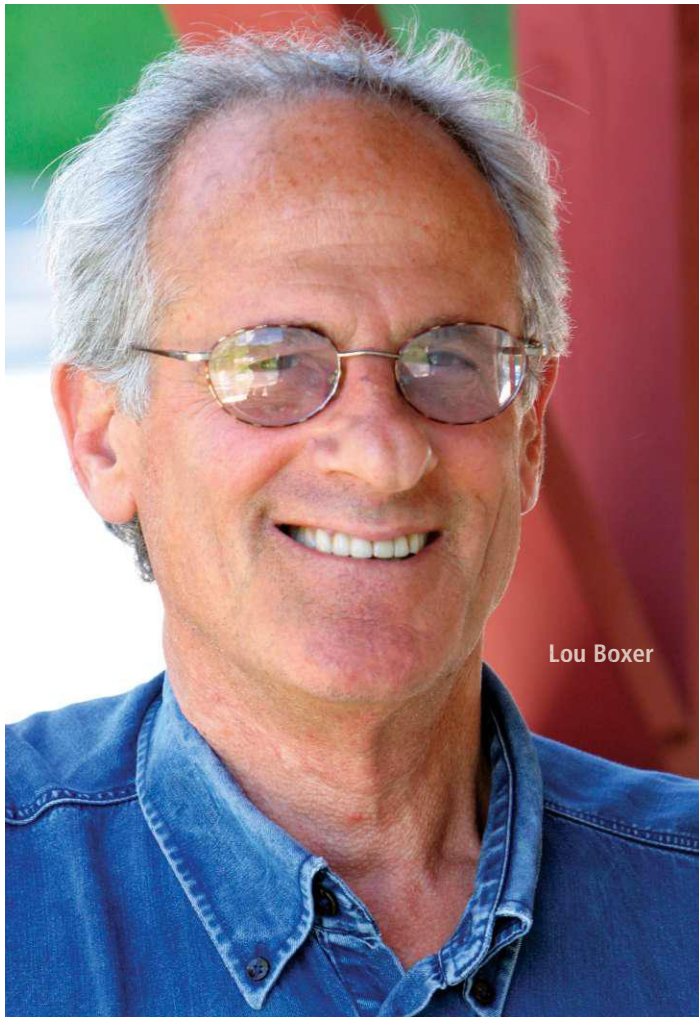
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The Art and Craft of Custom Home Building / January/February 2011

2011 Custom Builder of the Year

For Jay True and Jim Murphy,
merely good isn't good enough

Plus: The Custom Market Watch



Lou Boxer

Master Class

By Meghan Drueding

During his career as a custom builder, Lou Boxer has made it through three recessions. "The first one, in the late 1970s, I was just getting started," he says. "The second one was in the 1990s, and the third one is now." Based in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, he fell into building by chance when his band played a gig at the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, Mass., almost 40 years ago. An audience member ended up hiring him as a carpenter, and Boxer loved the work so much he never left it.

During the housing boom, Boxer built mostly vacation homes and compounds for high-flying clients. He teamed with blue-chip architects from Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. Big budgets and ample time frames allowed him to focus on creating the best-constructed, most beautiful homes he possibly could, and he reveled in pursuing perfection. "Some of us were rock star builders," he remembers. The company boasted a stable of top-notch carpenters, and a list of the Berkshires' best subcontractors filled Boxer's Rolodex.

Many of those things haven't changed. Boxer's top priority remains building great-looking, solid structures. He's laid off only one staff member since the recession began, and he hasn't cut his unusually generous benefits package. The 13-person company pays 100 percent of its employees' health care costs, and it offers a 401(k) plan.

Since 2008, though, Boxer's had to adjust his expectations to match the types of commissions he receives. Projects have gotten smaller and more local; instead of building new, second homes for out-of-towners, he's doing more remodels and additions for full-time residents. They're still nice projects, and he feels lucky to have them. But reno-

New Order

A Massachusetts custom builder adjusts to a changed market.

10

THERE'S GOOD ENOUGH.
AND THEN THERE'S MARVIN.



Boxer and his crew are known for finessing tricky details such as the bluestone walls and textured wood siding at this Austerlitz, N.Y., house, guest-house, and garage. The project was completed in 2008 and designed by Anmahian Winton Architects of Cambridge, Mass.



vating adds another layer of potential problems to a job. "You're living with the people," Boxer points out. "Logistically, it's more complex." Remodeling costs also are harder to predict than the cost of a new house because of all the variables of an existing home's condition.

Of course, in this market, controlling costs is paramount. No matter what the scope of a job, Boxer finds himself working with the architect to simplify a project after the initial cost is presented to the client. "It happened before, but not on every job," he says. The amount clients are willing to pay for architecture is lower, so he and his staff often rely on fewer and less-detailed drawings. He spends a lot of time obtaining bids from multiple subcontractors, trying to maintain a balance between his efforts to stay competitive

Lou Boxer Builder
West Stockbridge, Mass.
www.louboxerbuilder.com
Type of business:
Custom builder/remodeler
Years in business: 32
Employees: 13
2010 starts: 3



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THERE'S GOOD ENOUGH.
AND THEN THERE'S MARVIN.



Building the pristinely perfect Nef House in Great Barrington, Mass., ranks as one of Boxer's favorite experiences as a custom builder. Washington, D.C., architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen designed the project to demanding standards, and Boxer and his team delivered.



and his concern for the consequences. "Who you use as subs really is important in terms of the finished product," he says. "But you don't want to price yourself out of business, so we've had to look around."

Boxer never considered cutting benefits, even though this commitment makes his already-slim profit margins that much tighter. "It's not a business decision," he explains. "It's from the heart." Many of his employees have worked for him for 15 to 20 years, or even longer. "I treat them well, we're family," he says. "The finished product reflects that."

The market for vacation homes in the Berkshires hasn't dried up completely, luckily for Boxer and his staff. They're currently building a new vacation house designed by a highly regarded firm they've enjoyed working with in the past, Cambridge, Mass.-based Anmahian Winton Architects. Boxer also has



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PHOTOS: ROBERT C. LAUTMAN

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THERE'S GOOD ENOUGH.
AND THEN THERE'S MARVIN.



The company builds both modern and traditional homes. This classically styled, 7,100-square-foot residence in West Stockbridge, Mass., built in 2007, features landscaping by Gregory Lombardi Design of Cambridge, Mass., and architecture by Flavin Architects of Boston.



an extensive renovation and addition under construction.

His outlook on the market has improved since fall 2008, when the phone stopped ringing for several months. Now he's got work lined up for the next eight or nine months (as opposed to a two-year backlog during the boom times.) Boxer's not sure whether the new-home market in his region will ever return to its pre-recession levels. "It's a big unknown," he says. In general, he adds, "people don't have confidence in the economy yet. People will pull the trigger when they see more than a glimmer of hope."

Boxer notes that the custom building business has always held inherent risks. "As a builder, you have to have a strong survival instinct," he says. He continues to find pleasure in getting up in the morning and going to work. "We all love a challenge," he says. Like many of his peers, he's accepted the reality of a different, more sober economic environment. "In the final analysis, we're still building people's dreams, and people are still appreciative of what we do," he says. "But the process has changed." ■

PHOTOS: MICHELLE QUIGLEY, COURTESY LOU BOXER BUILDER

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