



It's a sunny September day on Shelburne Point. Westerly breezes lift the waves on Lake Champlain into whitecaps beneath the blue Adirondacks. Where an expansive lawn ends at the shore, a hammock hangs between shade trees beside a low boat-house. Overlooking this heavenly scene is

a three-story, 5,500-square-foot shingled structure as perfect as any home could be. With its classic features, pleasing proportions, and fine craftsmanship, it looks as though it might have been here for decades—or as though it will be here for countless years to come. That's what Chris Quinn hopes.

Like the rest of the team at Red House Building, an employee-owned co-op in Colchester, Chris favors a sustainable approach to building design. For him this includes using materials that will endure, physically and aesthetically—like the Classically detailed columns and copper roofing of this home's porches; its Doug-

# Red House Building



## Where Structure Meets Art

By Nancy Humphrey Case  
Photos by Jeremy Gantz



**Above:** Owner-managers Chris Quinn and Dunbar Oehmig.

las fir flooring and beadboard ceilings; and its Vermont slate kitchen counters. “I hope 50 years from now this house will still be considered highly crafted, with architectural integrity,” Chris says, standing outside the recently completed renovation designed by Ramsay Gourd Architects.

### Quality of Service and Craftsmanship

Chris’s pride is well taken. The renovation and addition to a pre-existing Cape was “super challenging,” he says. It involved removing the second story of the original house and protecting what remained with a waterproof membrane—“a giant rubber

bathtub”—while the new second and third stories as well as an addition with a tower were merged with the older structure. The original garage, which blocked part of the lake view, was picked up and moved with two cranes. And the whole project had to be accomplished on a tight schedule. Leslie Vought, who owns the property with



**Square Footage:** 3,600  
**No. of Rooms:** 15  
**No. of Bedrooms:** 6  
**No. of Baths:** 4  
**Siding:** Sustainable  
**Windows:** Double Insulated  
Pella Special Order  
**LEEDS Rating:** ??

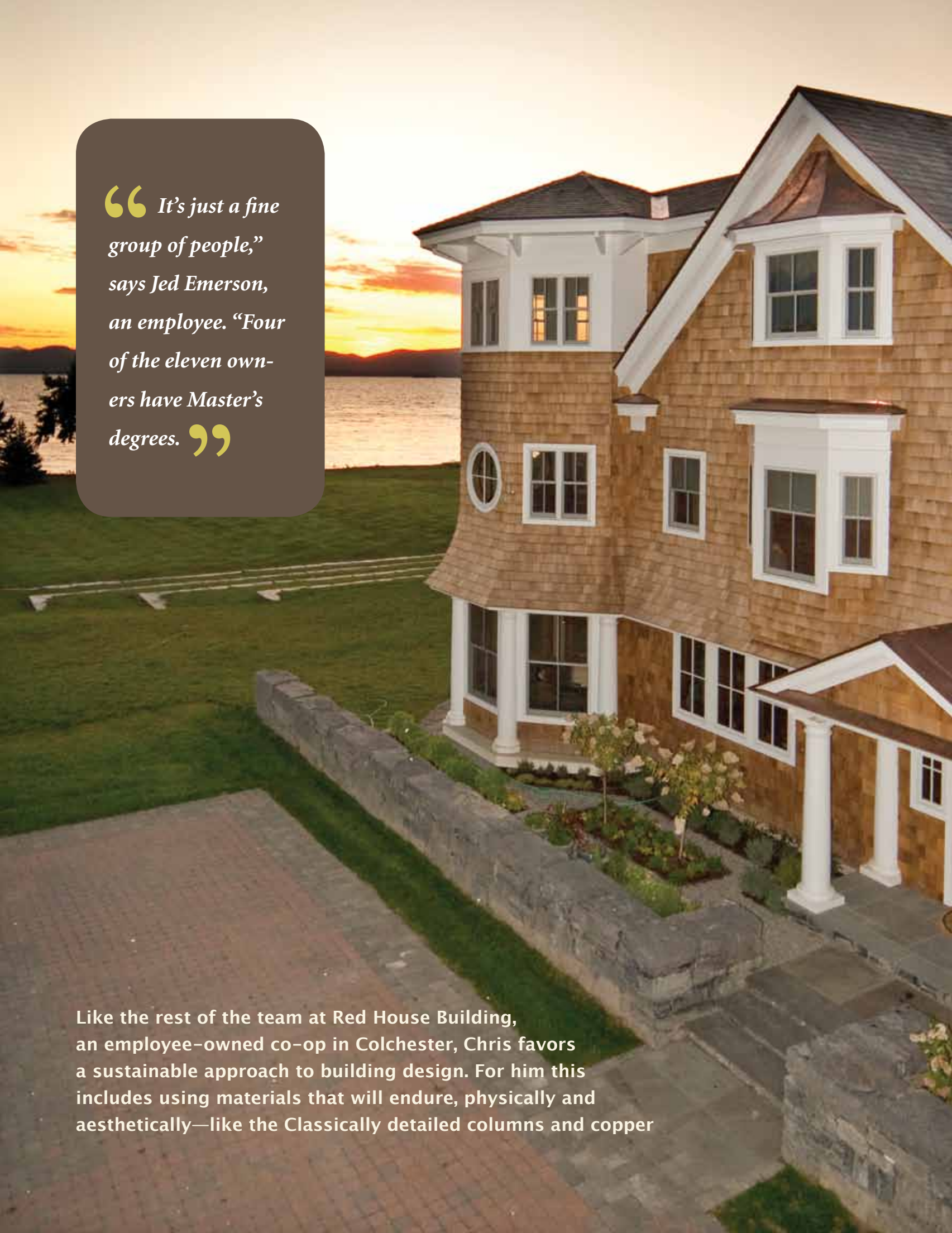
**Above: Chris Quinn and Dunbar Oehmig, owners and ...ed, tempus vel velit. Sed rhoncus dignissim est, sed dignissim nibh ultrices eu. Pellente**

her husband, had been through three other major renovations. All of them went well. But she distinguishes this one as “an amazing experience” due to the quality of service as well as craftsmanship Red House Builders gave the couple. “Chris [manager of the project] was so organized and so thoughtful,” Leslie says, “and everyone who worked on [the house] did an incredible job.”

### **Talented and Dedicated Employee-Owners**

Underlying this rare quality is the business’s uncommon structure. Eleven employee-owners set policy and share profits, while another eleven employees have the potential to buy into the company after working for Red House for three years. Dunbar Oehmig, who started the company, turned his conventional construction business into an employee-owned company in 2003 with valuable advice from John Abrams of South Mountain Building Company of Martha’s Vineyard and the Vermont Employee Ownership Center. While Dunbar and Chris manage day-to-day operations and interface with clients and architects, the business has a one-person, one-vote corporate structure. This translates into a highly motivated workforce that thinks in terms of what’s best for the





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company—and the client. “Everyone has an investment in everything going well,” Dunbar says—“the quality of the work, the schedule, the budget—everything clients care about.”

“You see people coming to a job site early or staying late, or finishing up something on their own time,” says employee-owner David Matesi. “It’s just a fine group of people,” says Jed Emerson, an employee. “Four of the eleven owners have Master’s degrees.”

Chris has a Master’s in historic preservation. Dunbar earned his in English and American literature, but when his teaching assistantship ran out and he was hungry, he started working as a carpenter. Did his background in literature help shape the business? “I think my interest in having an equitably owned company came from things I read,” Dunbar says.

“A lot of our clients are well-educated, sophisticated, no matter what their budget is,” Chris adds. “Our varied backgrounds enable us to understand clients’ and architects’ vi-





demned, the three-story structure ties in architecturally to surrounding houses while upgrading the aesthetics of the neighborhood. That made the project rewarding to Dunbar and the others who worked on it, some of whom live nearby.

## Welcoming a Variety of Projects

The photos that hang in Red House Building's offices show the diversity and scope of their projects: a family camp on Thompson's Point in Charlotte, a modern guesthouse on a Mad River estate, an award-winning city Victorian, an 1815 stone cottage, a new farmhouse featured in *Fine Homebuilding*. Each one is so different from the rest, yet they all share an artistic refinement.

Besides whole-house projects, the business welcomes and values small jobs. "It might be someone's dream house they're building for retirement, or it might be a kitchen remodel that someone has been saving for her whole life," Chris says. "People put a lot of trust and confidence in us, and we respect that."

Testimonials on the Red House website drip with praise, not only for the builders' skill and professionalism but also for the spirit of care, diligence, and attentiveness they give their clients. Perhaps Red House Building itself has evolved from a well-thought-out structure into an art of doing business.

**RED HOUSE BUILDING**  
 1 MILL STREET, #160  
 BURLINGTON, VT 05401-1533  
 (802) 651-0122  
 WWW.REDHUSBUILDING.COM

sion and goals."

Dunbar points out some of their most valuable employee-owners have no formal education at all, but are "super smart." "The thing we look for in hiring is aptitude and intelligence," Chris says. He talks about the team's desire to continue to learn and be challenged.

## Reinventing the Process

Perhaps this shows itself best in the energy efficiency of the houses they build and renovate. Two lake houses currently under construction in South Hero have double the insulation required by code, geothermal heating and cooling systems, solar electric and hot water, and wind power. "We're reinventing the way we build houses," Chris says. Yet the company doesn't necessarily use every new idea that comes out. "There's a tremendous amount of information out there,

a lot of it conflicting. We spend a lot of time doing research."

A project Dunbar managed on Walnut Street in Burlington's north end was commissioned by a UVM graduate from California, who wanted it to be a model of sustainable design. "The owner really pushed me hard on this, to tell you the truth," says Dunbar, standing outside the unpretentious but tasteful 1,700-square-foot home. When the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certifier tested it, he found it the tightest house he'd tested in Vermont—by a factor of two. Besides being super insulated, it has a flat, soil-covered "garden roof," and preheats the hot water with heat recovered from water going down the drain.

Replacing a house that had been con-