



Foreword

by John Abrams

ABOUT 35 YEARS AGO I moved, with my wife and child and a small collection of friends, to undeveloped land in Guilford, Vermont. We were headed back to the land with plenty of passion and no plan. We camped on the land, cleared it, planted vegetable gardens, and prepared to build a house. We had, among us, almost no money, but we had the energy of youth. We found barns in the area that were falling down, and local farmers who were happy to see them go. We laboriously dismantled them and hauled the materials back to our land in beat-up trucks. Unskilled but undaunted, we erected shelter from the ruins of the past. This was the first building I ever built from scratch *and* my first “green” building, all rolled into one. It was the beginning of a romance with design and building that has remained with me through the decades.

The lessons we learned back then, as we first left the gate — salvaging and marshalling resources, using materials in inventive ways, and fearlessly (and sometimes foolishly) trying new approaches — are still reflected in the work of my design-build company. But as our skills, our practices, and our buildings became more refined, we grew conscious of the environmental implications of our activity. We began to concentrate our efforts on “solar” houses. Over time we learned that a house must be so much more than that. “What are *good* houses?” I asked

myself. The English architect Charles Voysey once said, “Simplicity, sincerity, repose, directness, and frankness are moral qualities as essential to good architecture as to good people.” We tried to embed those qualities in our houses. We tried to push our craft forward. At the same time, we tried to make houses that are easy on the land, durable, energy-efficient and productive, resource-conserving, and healthy. As we hunted for information to help us learn, Alex Wilson played an important role.

Alex’s involvement with renewable energy and green building goes way back. He worked with the New Mexico Solar Energy Association in the late seventies when it was essentially a hotbed of grassroots solar experimentation and activity. He became the executive director of the Northeast Sustainable Energy Association in Vermont, and created a new hotbed. When his tenure as NESEA’s director ended, he joined the board, and our paths crossed there when I joined that board in 1990. I’m glad for the crossing. It led to an association which became a friendship that has lasted many years.

For the past 15 years the newsletter Alex founded, *Environmental Building News*, has been the single strongest voice for residential and commercial environmental building. The consistent in-depth research, no-nonsense, unbiased reporting, and long reach has provided practitioners like me with information we could not possibly get elsewhere. With a biologist’s trained eye and skeptical sensibility, Alex and his cohorts provide impeccable information. For all those years, I have served on the newsletter’s advisory board. Although my contributions have been minor, the honor of the service has been great.

Along with the newsletter, Alex’s company, BuildingGreen, Inc., has developed an array of other important tools for professionals. Now, with the publication of *Your Green Home*, Alex has turned his attention to the general public, to people who are building homes for themselves, or having them built. People like you.

That’s a good thing for all of us. When I read the manuscript I was almost embarrassed to find out how much I learned. Wait a minute — this is my field, this is what I do, and this book was written for homeowners, not for professionals like me. But I was delighted, too. I found a wealth of information carefully explained, relentlessly organized, and neatly sorted out to make it readable and comprehensive. You will share my delight if the topic piques your curiosity, or if you are about to build or renovate a new home. I look forward to sharing this book with all of

our clients, *and* with our designers as well. A single source of information, being read by those on both sides of the table, will enhance communication and help us to make better buildings.

This book will not teach you how to make a good house, or a green one. It will teach you how to learn. It will teach you how to find the help you need, and how to ask the right questions, of yourself and others. It will help you to think — about where, how big, what kind of structure, energy use, materials, systems, indoor environment, water, waste, landscape, and even about how to live well in your new home. It will teach you how much there is to know and how little possibility there is that you (or I) could know it all.

Not to worry. What I particularly like about this book is that it unpacks all the tools and concepts and unwraps all the mystery. Although it covers an exceptional range of green building topics and issues, it is not overwhelming. The message is that it's not necessary to knock yourself out to do everything green at once, but that it's better to do something — whatever aspects you can manage, as much as you can, and do it well—than it is to do nothing.

My decades of design and building have convinced me that making a house, although it is an immense undertaking with attendant stresses and difficulties, can also be — and should also be — a joyous adventure. One thing I have learned is that it is the buildings that are loved that endure. Buildings that people care about are maintained and adapted to new uses over time. Are you getting ready to build or renovate a house? If so, read this book. It will help you find your way down a path that is likely to produce a home that will stand the test of time in that way. Remember to enjoy the ride!

John Abrams is cofounder and CEO of South Mountain Company, a widely respected, employee-owned, design-build company on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. His 2005 book, *The Company We Keep: Reinventing Small Business for People, Community, and Place* (Chelsea Green), traces the history of South Mountain and explores the role of business as a potent force for cultural, social, and ecological progress.