

DULUTH TIMBER COMPANY

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INDUSTRIAL FOREST

DESIGNER SHOWCASE

Two Lakes From the Nearest Road: How Will Steger's Early Vision Built a Wilderness Cathedral of Reclaimed Wood

Photos and text by Lisa McKhann



Will Steger's conference center features a timber-framed conservatory and greenhouse of our reclaimed Douglas fir, enclosed entirely in glass. The frame has stood for over 10 years now, tight as ever, a tribute both to the craftsmanship of master framer Jeff Kemmer and to our old, stable wood.



It's a long way in, and a long way up to the north woods aerie of arctic adventurer and ecological advocate Will Steger. But then, inaccessibility was his primary criteria when, at age 19, Steger defined the perfect location for home: "two lakes from the nearest road." Fortunately, that put the global traveler only a little over two hours from Duluth Timber Company headquarters, from which Steger has purchased several semi-trailer loads of reclaimed timbers and redwood over the past decades.

"I went 25 years without a road," Steger says of the winding, rocky six-mile drive to his place. "The road was the biggest compromise I ever made in my life."



Strong visions have long guided Steger, both in his life as an explorer and in the home-base he's assembled in northern Minnesota. On a recent visit, he let two of us from Duluth Timber roam his unfinished conference center unescorted. Up and up we climbed the spiral stairs, each level offering

new views outside and new surprises within. There to photograph Duluth Timber's reclaimed wood, we soon were carried away by the scope and scale, the grandeur and insanity of the venture.

"This place is a 25-year project," Steger said, and I'm on year 22."

Seat-of-the-Pants Site Selection

Steger first sat on the site of the conference center as a young man. Having just articulated his two-lakes-from-the-nearest-road rule, he began to get indications of where to look. "People kept talking about Ely. 'Have you been to Ely?' I'd never been to Ely before." He came, he saw, he conjured.

> Will Steger cont'd. . . .



Kemmer (standing left of Steger in the picture here) spent 18 months over three years framing Steger's dream place. The raised walkway through the white pines is all made of our reclaimed redwood. Steger prefers it oiled, which weathers to a soft charcoal grey. Kemmer framed the walkway post structure, including one tricky three-legged tower.



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At the top of a rock outcropping, overlooking a broad, deep lake, he looked around for a resting spot. Finding none, he picked up and carried over a chunk of wood to sit on. "Where I put the log and sat, that's it," he says, the site of his conference building. That was a man of 19 back in 1964.

The conference center towers high on the property. Built of stone, hewn-logs, timber-frame, and a cascade of glass, this citadel is so fantastic, one knows at once it is the work of a visionary, not an architect. Sure enough, Steger says, the design came to him in a 1989-90 crossing of Greenland when he had 'a lot' of time holed up, waiting on weather. Armed with a powerful imagination and a ruler, he drew what has since been built.

Master Timber Framer Erects Cathedral in the Trees

The day we were there, Steger was discussing timber repairs with one of Duluth Timber's regular customers, master timber framer Jeff Kemmer. Also based in Ely, Kemmer framed the towering conservatory and

greenhouse spaces more than a decade ago. Since then, three horizontal panes of glass have leaked, and leaked some more. With the floor area still unfinished (it will have water features and growing spaces built in to the granite bedrock), Kemmer is back to discuss replacing a few water-damaged posts.

Looking into the upper reaches of the conservatory, Kemmer said the frame is actually three

frames-worth of wood—that's 750 pieces of reclaimed Douglas fir, "sticks" as the framers like to call them, honkin' big wood to the lay public. "Timber framers like tight joinery," said Kemmer, who has framed exclusively with reclaimed wood since the 1980s. "I shudder to think what this would look like now if it had been green wood. It would be cracked and twisted."

He says the design itself could not have been done in green wood. Over the decade since its raising, gaps would have formed at every meticulously scribed joint. Pointing to a still-perfect joint with his extended tape measure, he said, "If that was in green wood, it would have an eighth-inch gap now. If it was [green] oak, a quarter-inch."

>Will Steger cont'd p. 3 . . .



The vision takes shape, including the "Saturn window" at right, designed to mimic the arc of Saturn's rings as seen from a particular angle. That facade features our reclaimed redwood siding, again oiled to bring out a matte, charcoal-colored tone.



Steger's drawing, torn out and framed above the mantel of his tiny hobbit-like home, has been executed to perfection by craftsmen willing to go the distance.

For more about Will Steger's adventures and planetary advocacy, visit www.willsteger.com and www.willstegerfoundation.org.



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Steger Loves His Reclaimed Wood

Steger has long been a fan of reclaimed wood, even the "nasty, caustic stuff" that comes from pickle and wine tanks. "When you take one of those big, ugly timbers," he says, "and you slice off the top layer . . ." He pointed to some redwood tank stock that is serving its third use already, just on his property. He is a reclaimer's reclaimer, a scrounger with an intimate rapport with all his old wood.

When his unfinished Douglas fir timbers began to age and silver, it didn't fit Steger's vision. So, "a few years back, I hand-sanded every post in here, and with a six-inch sander. It took me over two years," Steger said. "The key is to do the oiling every four years. You really have to keep up for the first ten to 12 years." This same kind of persistence might, one begins to understand, get a guy to the North Pole.

As one who has seen, documented, and speaks of the changes in the earth's polar regions, Steger values forest preservation. "Reclaimed wood is the right choice in two ways: ethically and also for the quality of the wood," he said. "Ethically, you couldn't justify cutting down virgin forests. Reclaimed wood just makes sense. It's the McMansions that strip the Western forests."

Simple Starting Place for Life Well Lived

Steger's own home more resembles a bivouac or hobbit house than a McMansion. He has led us on a path through tiny pocket gardens amid the bedrock. Rhubarb is just waking up in the cool June weather. His home sits crouched and compact on a hillside. Where the conference center reaches up and out, the home dives down and in. One imagines that Steger gets enough exposure in his life and on his land.

He invites us inside to view his sketch for the conference center. Two steps through the low doorway, we see it framed above his small hearth. There's something powerful about such big things taking shape from such a simple start. But that's kind of the story of this man. One compact man, now in his 60s, with visions and actions that crisscross the globe and may help save it!

On the way out, he grabs a garden shovel from where he left it before all the hubbub of visitors arrived. He leads us back up the path and pauses beside a patch of dark topsoil. "It's good to have a warm day," he says, "finally." Then, with the same disgust as any northern Minnesotan, he adds, "It's been arctic weather here this spring." Well now, he would know. We leave him there, digging in his garden.