



Cherry Hill Cohousing
(Photo by Marcus Fisher)
Bill + Joan in France 2023



Last September, WMAIA member Bill Austin AIA retired from his architectural practice and sold it to his employees. “I’ve had a wonderful career, and having all of my employees form a coop to continue our work is as good as it gets!” he said. Austin Design Inc (ADi) is now Austin Design Cooperative Inc (ADCi). He was able to pass it on during one of its strongest years with a solid footing in the areas of affordable housing and craft breweries.

Austin enrolled at UMass Amherst in 1969 and became caught up in the social and political upheavals of the time. Drawn to the rural beauty of the Connecticut River Valley, he decided to put down roots and left UMass to buy into a commune owned by friends. He learned self-reliance, how to work cooperatively, and developed an interest in the concept of “home.” The 18th century farmhouse needed renovation, so Austin learned carpentry, others plumbing and wiring. Reacting to the 1974 oil embargo, they started working on passive solar projects.

Realizing that his interest lay in design, Austin returned to UMass, enrolled in University Without Walls, and earned an independent study BA in Architectural Studies with classes in the Interior Design Department, where the seeds of the later accredited School of Architecture had been planted. Professors Arnold Friedmann Hon. WMAIA, who founded and headed the program, and architect Bill Rupp were supportive. Austin notes: “They made my career possible. I was so fortunate to know them and have their faith in me.”

After graduating during the recession of the early 1980s, finding work was difficult, so he moved his family to Florida to build a house for his brother. After finishing the house, he returned to Shelburne Falls in 1984 and went to work for architect Peter Kitchell. In spring 1985, they formed Kitchell & Austin Inc, Mary Kraus AIA joined in 1987, and shortly thereafter, K&A assembled a team to participate in a town-sponsored competition to develop affordable housing at the Cherry Hill Golf Course in Amherst. That project fell through, but the property was offered to a newly formed cohousing group if they could demonstrate the ability to make a third of the homes affordable. Cherry Hill Cohousing was a success. Kraus went on to form Kraus Fitch Architects with fellow cohousing resident Laura Fitch AIA. K&A continued designing other affordable communities, such as the Pomeroy Lane Cooperative, developed to provide long-term affordable housing, including units to accommodate people with cognitive and physical disabilities. In 1991, Austin became a licensed architect in Vermont and New York, but stressed by the recent recession, Kitchell and Austin dissolved their corporation in 1993.

In the early '90s, Austin, Kraus, Landscape Architect Joan Rockwell, who was part of the original Cherry Hill development team, and others formed Community Vision, a non-profit company dedicated to preserving rural land with guidelines that used new development to preserve and revitalize traditional patterns of town and village centers, which CV encoded into the Cape Cod Design Guideline Manual prepared for the Cape Cod Commission.

The mid to late '90s was a period of transition. Starting Austin Design (AD) in Shelburne Falls shifted his focus away from Amherst. Rockwell, now his partner and an environmental planner at Mount Snow, brought him into a renovation project that led to several more projects. He collaborated with disability activist Chris Palames, founder of Stavros and Independent Living Resources, on a variety of accessibility projects. In 1995, Austin started working with the Northampton Brewery on what would be the first of several renovation projects over the next 30 years. Austin worked with Anne Perkins, Director of Rural Development Inc, part of the Franklin County Housing Authority, to complete several affordable, sustainable housing projects, including the net zero energy Wisdom Way Solar Village. In 1999, Austin and Rockwell bought a 1906 two-room schoolhouse in Colrain that served as their offices for the next 18 years.

Rachael Chase joined AD in 1998, followed by Aaron Cusimano, architect Chris Farley AIA, and interior designer Grey Marchese, forming the core team as AD grew. Commissions included vacation homes, commercial projects, and a large recreational community in Vermont. Other projects included Katywil, a cohousing eco-community in Colrain, as well as several affordable housing and senior housing developments for the Hilltown and other CDCs. The Mountain House at Mount Snow and the Amherst Poolhouse, which won several awards and was published in *Dwell*, were particularly important to Austin. The Poolhouse project, led by Chase, shifted AD's aesthetic focus from New England vernacular and American Craftsman-influenced design towards modernism. The Mountain House, published in *New England Home*, took three years and was almost completely handcrafted by more than two dozen artisans, including woodworkers, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, window makers, timber framers, furniture makers, glassblowers, masons, and a crew from Switzerland who spent six weeks installing spruce paneling and doors they had crafted in their Swiss woodshop. In 2001, Austin and Rockwell designed and built their beloved Colrain home.

Austin Design became Austin Design Inc (ADi), an S-corporation, in June 2004. Austin found his footing as a manager, hiring the right people, and matching their interests and talents to the appropriate projects. They took turns as team leaders, as well as serving project teams in supporting roles. The company had a relaxed horizontal structure, and everyone worked in the same open space. Austin valued transparency, including corporate financial matters. Because much of their work was about lifestyle, they picked up the tag line “Architecture for enjoying life.” In 2004, Austin joined the WMAIA, serving on the Executive Committee from 2005 to 2012 and as President from 2008 to 2010.

BILL AUSTIN AIA RETIRES (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

In 2008, the country was again in recession. Most of the core team moved on, but slowly, a new team formed. Austin laid himself off in fall 2011 to keep his team together, which proved to be fortuitous. In spring 2012, he headed up an A&E team to design a lodge for the Hermitage Club, a private ski club at Haystack Mountain. The fast-track design-build program was large and aggressive: 50,000 square feet of mixed use to be built and operational in a year at a cost of \$10M. It ended up at 90,000 square feet, operational in a year and half, and cost \$30M.

Austin could not have accepted the commission if his team hadn't been in place. "This was beyond anything I had ever done, but I was certain in our ability to do it and do it well," said Austin. In 2010, Austin and Rockwell met Marky Jean-Pierre, a UMass doctoral student and the founder of RIVE, a non-profit organization dedicated to building schools in rural Haiti. They developed conceptual plans for two campuses and are still working pro bono with RIVE.

Since several employees lived in southern Vermont and were active in civic affairs, ADi opened an office in Brattleboro, expanding its regional base. Rich Holschuh, ADi's marketing director, learned that the Alchemist Brewery was going to build a new facility in Stowe, VT. Peter Webster, newly hired by Austin, had been a brewmaster in Seattle. With Holschuh's warm outreach, Webster's experience, and Austin's history with the Northampton Brewery, ADi was hired. That project led to a brewery for Lawson's Finest Liquids, Tree House Brewing, and many others, establishing ADi in the craft beer community.

Tom Chalmers AIA joined ADi in 2012 and expanded its presence in affordable housing, working with the Franklin County Housing Authority, the Hilltown CDC, Rural Development Inc,

and Valley Community Development on projects such as the newly completed Sanderson Place, an affordable senior housing project in Sunderland, MA, and the PHIUS-certified East Gables currently under construction in Amherst, MA.

In 2017, ADi closed its Colrain office due to lack of adequate bandwidth, opened one in Greenfield, and doubled the space in Brattleboro. When Covid struck in 2020 and everyone began working remotely, ADi closed its Greenfield office.

Covid struck ADi hard, halting almost all its projects. Austin immediately applied for PPP funding, which carried the company until most projects were back on line, ironically making 2020 and 2021 financially strong years. Now was the time to retire. Knowing that the firm needed a strong, dedicated manager to continue, he hired Chamois Holschuh. Austin approached his team about buying him out. With excellent guidance from Matt Cropp at the Vermont Employee Ownership Center, they assembled a transition team. The process was complex and took about a year, but went very smoothly. Said Austin, "For me, it's about relationships. I believe in synergy, and our team had incredible chemistry. In retrospect, I think this was always how I wanted it to go."

Austin and Rockwell started building their home in Maine in 2013 and now live there full time. They said that they really appreciate the response they've had to their home mainehomedesign.com/features/artful-point/#close mainehomes.com/2022-maine-homes-design-awards-judged-winners/. Austin is still getting used to retirement and misses everyone, but not the responsibility. Every ending is a new beginning.

CONGRATULATIONS, BILL!



Photo courtesy of Spacecrafting

©2023 Marvin Lumber and Cedar Co., LLC.

MARVIN 

Make space for dreams come true.

Making your client's dreams a reality is a complex process with many moving parts. A partner who understands this can be invaluable. At Marvin, we take considered care to deliver inspired design, high-quality windows and doors, and life-bettering innovations. It's all to help you make space for distinction, expression, and everything that matters most to you and your clients.

marvin.com/architectural-resources

13

INTERESTED IN ADVERTISING IN THE WMAIA NEWSLETTER?
CONTACT DIRECTOR@WMAIA.ORG FOR MORE INFORMATION!