



BENSONWOOD HOMES PHOTOS

Tedd Benson's modern timber homes reflect the same timelessness and superior craftsmanship as the timber frames built more than a century ago.

# The Art of the Craft

Timber framing was a dying craft in this country until a young carpenter named Tedd Benson resuscitated the age-old building method. Now, 30 years later and with more than 600 timber structures to his credit Tedd says, there's still so much more to accomplish.

BY LISA MARQUIS JACKSON

Since Tedd Benson founded Bensonwood Woodworking Company in 1974, he's been featured on a variety of television shows, written three books and was instrumental in forming the Timber Framers Guild of North America. We recently caught up with the founder of modern day timber framing to talk about his passions and what the future of timber homes has in store.

**THL:** In 1974, your mission was to revive the timber framing craft. How exactly did this become a passion of yours?

**TB:** It came from the fact that I moved from the West to the East and appreciated the old craft in ways that others did not. I'd worked in construction and residential building in Colorado during college, so I was more or less in the trade. But, there, the art of being a carpenter wasn't much more than swinging a big hammer.

Then I came to the East Coast with my wife, and I got work in the Boston area. That's when I discovered some amazing old timber frame buildings and had an opportunity to renovate and repair them. I was amazed at the quality and craftsmanship that was a part of the buildings. I think I appreciated something that many local carpenters and builders took for granted.

I began to talk to the old carpenters about how these buildings went together. I think the old-timers appreciated my interest. It brought out a lot of stories, and it brought out their own interest and expertise about the buildings. Although there were no practicing timber framers, there were still people who knew about it.

**THL:** There literally were no timber framers at that time?

**TB:** As a craft, it had died around the early 1900s, so by 1960, no one had done it for a full generation. It only existed in the memory of people who had, perhaps, worked on a building in their youth with their grandpa who still had the tools and the original expertise.

**THL:** You were honored earlier this year by PATH (The Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing) for your strong commitment to researching, developing and marketing the improvements in housing. What improvements are on the design horizon?

**TB:** The philosophical issues surrounding the whole building process leave me wanting to create methods to allow every new home to be designed as a unique entity, instead of as a production entity. And in practice, this is something that's almost completely gone, except in the high-end custom homes. The modern idea goes back to an ancient ideal—it's from Vitruvius. It's sort of the foundation of architecture, which is that every building should be a composition of beauty, strength and function. Too of-



The elegance of timber framing can be evident throughout a home—even in a kitchen.

ten the modern house sacrifices one or more of those.

At Bensonwood, we're promoting the concept that more of the building should be produced off site and pre-fabricated. In 2006, it's ridiculous that the building is constructed onsite, one piece at a time. The work is produced in a way that's inefficient and unpredictable. The result in both cases is that the consumer is short-changed. You wouldn't consider building a car in your driveway.

There's also a need to separate the structure from the skin of a house—to detangle them and allow them to function independently. In the next 20 years, you'll see a lot more design that includes open access to wires and pipes without causing demolition to the house. Look at a hospital or an airport. Every pipe and wire is accessible, because it has to be. Basically, we're developing a residential equivalent of some concepts that have been in practice in other types of buildings for a while.

**THL:** When a person is trying to choose the right builder for his or her timber home, how important is direct experience?

**TB:** I don't think it's critical. It's more of an attitude that trying something new is an opportunity, not a problem. Lots of builders approach timber homes and see that the pro-

cess is different and certainly the product is different. If they view "different" as a problem, then it *is* a problem. And everything else can be more expensive and take longer, simply because of that attitude.

**THL:** You've authored three reference books for builders and designers of timber homes. What are some of the most common mistakes builders make when they attempt a timber project?

**TB:** Probably the education that needs to be done with all the mechanical trades. Clearly, there needs to be abundant preparation and education so that the plumber, electrician and the HVAC people have a good understanding of how their work is going to be approached in that building. If not, it can slow the project.

**THL:** So, what's next for you?

**TB:** I've never been as excited and enthusiastic about my work as I am today. It just keeps growing. I'm working on a new book that addresses some of the building principles that, I think, need to be incorporated in today's homes.

I'm still passionate about improving the quality of building in America. I love the timber-framing craft, and I think it's one of the really good answers for how to make better buildings. ■