

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2009

# Country Life Independent

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## THE SPIRIT OF A PLACE

### ABODE OF THE MESSAGE HIRES A MASTER PLANNER

By TIMOTHY TULLOCH



Photos by David Lee

An 1850 horse barn, top, is one of several Shaker buildings in use at the Abode of the Message, a Sufi community on the grounds of the old Mount Lebanon Shaker Village. Above, a modern geodesic dome is one of a number of meditation huts on the property.

**G**enius loci is an old Roman term that refers to the guardian or spirit of a place. The phrase comes to mind while walking along Darrow Road in the northeast corner of Columbia County, close to the Massachusetts border and just outside the hamlet of New Lebanon, at Mount Lebanon Shaker Village.

Some visitors may feel that a *genius loci* presides over the curious agglomeration of old stone, brick and wooden Shaker buildings that ramble alongside the road, dense in some spots and more spread out in others. For more than two centuries, Shakers and other seekers—including educators with new ideas—have been drawn to this gradually rising land on the western flank of the Berkshires.

There are no Shakers here anymore, other than those at rest in the Shaker cemetery. But modern visitors still feel the spirit of the old place, and the Shaker spirit lives on: There are the students at Darrow School, seeking their way; and there are the Sufis.

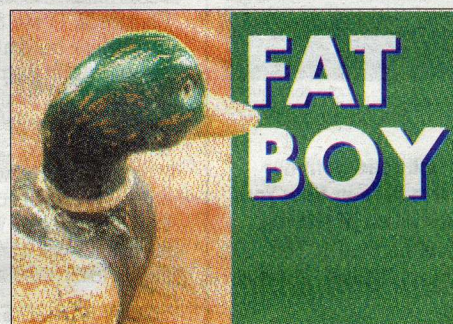
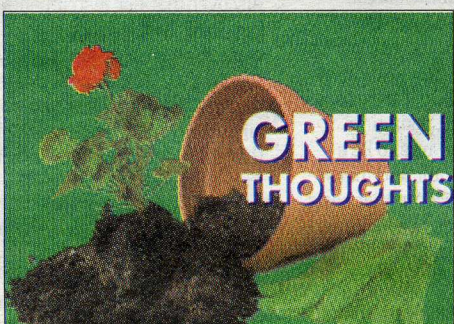
In 1975, the Sufi International Order-North America established the Abode of the Message on Mount Lebanon, having purchased the property with the blessing of the

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### Bluegrass

Low down on hybrids

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### Crunchy snow

Bad for deer, hunters

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## The spirit

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surviving Shakers at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. The Abode is the Order's headquarters and its main community, and about 40 members make it their year-round home.

Now looking to the future, the Order has commissioned a master plan, awarded last month to Dennis Wedlick Architects of New York and Hudson. Executive director Alima Laurie Lucinski says the plan's overall goal will be "to make this campus a model of an intentional community" between now and the year 2020.

"Intentional" communities are those formed by people with shared beliefs, values or commitments.

The Abode of the Message campus consists of a compact cluster of Shaker buildings on the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village site's highest ground, most of them constructed in the mid-19th century. When the master plan is completed sometime this summer, it will be part of the evolving history of the place.

It's a continuing story, dictated neither by a foundation nor a wealthy preservationist but writing itself, almost organically. The beauty of the venerable landscape, the history of its uses, and this moment in time seem to be fitting together in quite a remarkable way.

### In the beginning.....

Mount Lebanon Shaker Village was established in 1785, the year after the death of Mother Ann Lee at the original Shaker community in Watervliet. Mount Lebanon became the "largest and most industrious Shaker community from 1785 until 1947," according to the National Park Service's Shaker Historic Tour Travel Itinerary. It is part of the Mount Lebanon Historic District, a designated National Historic Landmark.

As the Shaker community on Mount Lebanon grew, it gradually organized itself into eight "families," each with its own family site. The first one a visitor sees after turning onto Darrow Road from U.S. 20 is the 10-building North Family site, slated to become the new home of the Shaker Museum and Library of Old Chatham, which acquired the buildings in 2004 and will relocate. Renovations are already underway.

Farther along the road are the buildings formerly occupied by the Church Family and now housing Darrow School, a private, co-educational preparatory school founded in 1932. The school's Heyniger Memorial Library is in the Shaker Second Meeting House, and the school has also saved, restored and repurposed other Shaker buildings.

Finally, at the end of the road, the visitor arrives at the South Family site, now the Abode of the Message.

Though defined by some as the mystical expression of Islam, Sufism more broadly belongs among ancient esoteric traditions and paths to inner peace, harmony with God, and expanded consciousness. Over the entrance to the Abode's meditation hall is a panel with symbols from major world religions and the words, "Enter unhesitatingly Beloved, for in this abode is naught but my longing for thee."

The Order's history began in Europe in 1910 with the arrival from India of Pir [master] Hazrat Inayat Khan, who was sent by his Sufi teacher to "unite East and West in the harmony of [his] music." Khan's religious philosophy drew on the collective wisdom of the major religious traditions, calling for personal growth with the help of a spiritual mentor versed in Sufi teachings.

His son Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan emigrated to America, where he served as head of the Order for 50 years and founded both the Abode of the Message and the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck. His grandson, Pir Zia Inayat Khan, now heads the Order and resides at the Abode.

Today, the Abode describes itself



*'There are many commonalities between the Abode and the Shakers. We have been a successful intentional community for 30 years now.'*

Alima Lucinski, Abode of the Message



Photo contributed

Jessie Young of Dennis Wedlick Architects, far left, takes notes to be used in preparing a new master plan for the Abode of the Message. Left, the contemporary dining hall maintains a Shaker feel, complete with a beautiful and practical way of storing drinking utensils.

as "a vibrant conference and retreat center, residential community, and home to the Suluk Academy, a school of esoteric Sufi studies in the tradition of Hazrat Inayat Khan." The Sufi Order International-North America has about 2,000 U.S. members.

### From Shakers to Sufis

All but one of the buildings on the Abode campus serve the Order's programs and mission: the only exception is leased to the Mountain Road School, a private elementary and pre-school originally founded to serve children of the Abode community and still closely connected with its programs.

"The varied retreats, workshops, and seminars at the Abode enrich the life of the school by bringing visitors from around the world," says the school's website ([www.mountainroadschool.org](http://www.mountainroadschool.org)). "Tibetan lamas, Buddhist dancers, Muslim imams, Native American shamans, and African healers are some of the visitors to the school over the years."

The remaining buildings on campus have been adapted as needed. A Shaker apple barn is now the meditation hall; the Shaker infirmary houses offices; the Brothers' workshop (where chairs were made) contains residents' apartments; and the Shaker trustees building is the Abode's guest house, with space for healing arts as well. The large main South Family building is now used much as the Shakers used it—as living space, a kitchen and dining room (there are nine community meals each week), and a library.

An 1850 horse barn houses offices and art studios. Its exterior will soon be restored through a grant from a New York State barn preservation program, and Lucinski says a children's nature center may be created in the barn some time in the future. Small retreat huts for individual silent meditation are scattered about, and trails criss-cross the woods. And the community maintains a five-acre organic vegetable garden and 35 landscaped beds, including flower and herb gardens.

"There are many commonalities between the Abode and the Shakers," says Lucinski. "We have been a successful intentional community for 30 years now."

She adds that the master planning process will help the Abode "fulfill [its] mission better." The Order plans to launch a major capital campaign next year, its 30th anniversary, to underwrite improvements and changes recommended in the completed plan.

### A new phase

Architect Dennis Wedlick, who has written (among others) a book called *The Good Home*, describes Mount Lebanon Shaker Village and Darrow Road as a "good neighborhood," and he calls it an excellent example of "preservation through use." He first saw the place when he was an architecture student at Syracuse University in the early 1980s. "It doesn't look very differ-

ent today," he says.

In his mind, the place is a "living community," it's like an old town that was founded in colonial times and unlike Shaker sites that are meticulous restorations similar to Colonial Williamsburg.

"Mount Lebanon," he says, "is a living landscape, not so precious that it can't thrive with people who have diverse aspirations." He feels, as do members of the Order, that the Abode is "meant to be there" as an extension in our own times of the Shaker approach of "hands to work, hearts to God."

Wedlick says his firm's master planning approach to the Abode of the Message plan will look beyond the buildings. "It's easy to focus on the buildings," he says, "but harder to notice the beauty of the land, how the land has been molded, and how the buildings relate to one another within this landscape."

He's excited about the project, he says, because "there are such resources to work with: the views, the breezes, the heritage of the region, the designs the Shakers left behind, the woods, stone and plantings, all the resources we can tap into; [it's] a terrific bonus for us."

He says the Shakers chose the site for its natural advantages and also because it was then on the main road and an excellent place from which to conduct commerce with the world. "The Sufis are like the Shakers in this respect too," he says. "They are very much an outreach community."

He acknowledges that first-time visitors "may get the impression now that this is a place you go to hide." As a landscape becomes less traveled—Darrow Road is now a secondary, local road—it can acquire a hideaway look. "But it's not that at all," he says. "The master plan will help with this by bringing out more the usefulness of this land."

Though planning is now in the early phase of gathering input from the Abode community, Wedlick foresees that a major contribution of the master plan will be "making their home as useful as possible."

The campus has much greater capacity than is now being realized, says Wedlick, as attested by documents showing how the Shakers utilized the land. "They say a decorator starts with the rug," he says. Similarly, the master plan will start with this underlying landscape.

The goal, Wedlick says, is not to bring back the landscape exactly to what it was, but to create an interesting new place, "a jewel for the community." And by community, he means the community at large as well as the Abode community.

"We believe in living places," he says. "We work often with historic properties and strive to help their stories live on. We don't believe in strict preservation just for preservation's sake."

"We aim to help the Sufi community take a look at their property again and formulate a new way of thinking about how they use the land, how they interact with

neighbors and visitors. The ultimate outcome should better support their needs, be easy to maintain, and be better for the environment."

Wedlick also says the master plan's proposals should make it easier for people to visit and stay longer, and for the Abode to accommodate a larger range of age groups.

"Because the site will be used more efficiently, it will feel bigger than it does now," he says. "Buildings may also be renovated so they can more easily tap into new technologies and be more environmentally friendly."

He hopes that during the "learning part of the process" his firm can project everything the Abode might consider expanding to in the future, and then ensure that they will already have the resources to do those things when they choose to. An immediate initiative, he says, will be "looking at alternative energy sources, even geothermal opportunities."

The team working on the Abode

project at Wedlick's office includes Marc Bailey, project manager, and Namita Modi, associate architect.

What will the Abode of the Message feel like 10 years hence?

"It will still feel like Sufi ground," says Wedlick. "You will feel you are in their community, one with perhaps even a stronger visual identity than it has now, a community of people who enjoy the land. But it will be easier for both residents and visitors to get around the place and enjoy it fully. The people of the Abode of the Message are very arms-open people and the place should feel that way too."

The Abode of the Message in 2020? Greener. More self-sustaining. More in harmony with this changing world. More strongly affirming its identity, visually. More enjoyable for both residents and its varied visitors. Yet it will still be what Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan saw as the perfect place.

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