

# BERKSHIRE HOME & STYLE



by Ned Depew

# Building for the Future



Interior images from the Passive House. Photos courtesy of Bill Stratton

The building industry is one of the most volatile sectors of the economy. In the last half-century at least, its history is that of repetitive cycles of boom-and-bust. To get involved in that kind of work—and to be able to make it work financially, even through those cycles, requires a special kind of dedication and expertise. Bill Stratton has both of those qualities, and more.

He's spent the last two decades in Columbia County and considers himself firmly settled here. Over that time, he's created a body of work ranging from "gut-remodels" to large and small additions to "out-of-the-ground" house projects—both for customers and on speculation, which have established him as one of the leaders in his industry in the area.

But his good reputation and his hard work haven't entirely spared him from the effects of the severe downturn experienced in the construction industry since 2008. Whereas four years ago he had work lined up for more than a year in advance and was turning jobs away, he's now on a shorter delay, looking at a number of prospects for work through the summer and fall.

The balance of his work has also changed. Where previously most of his work was in new construction with renovations and additions filling out the schedule, that has reversed and much of his recent work has been on existing homes, with fewer "out-of-the-ground" projects. Even so, he has managed to keep his crew busy. "It took longer to reach us here. We came out of a period that was crazy busy...there was work for everybody. Everyone refers to 2008 as the start of the downturn, but in the fall of '08 we were busy—way behind. But slowly it did affect us."

He is optimistic about prospects for the coming year, with an increase in inquiries and reports from the subcontractors—from foundations companies to electricians

and plumbers—that they are also getting more calls. "The spring coming up and the months going forward," Stratton reports, "look stronger than anything has in the last couple of years." He is not sure whether it will prove to be a short-term spike or a real turn-around.

Stratton has had good success on spec projects over the years, things he has taken on and invested time and money in without a client, and then sold on the open market. That has enabled him to do similar work for others, and right now he's in the final stages of preparing a project for an investor who is building a house for resale on a piece of property he's owned for several years. "He's a financial guy from New York," Stratton says, "and he thinks this is the right time to go ahead." So, that's another good sign and another large project for this year.

At the same time, Stratton is enjoying the fruits of his labor over the past couple of years, living in a Passive House he built to a design commissioned from architect Dennis Wedlick. He and his wife, Meg, have moved into the home in Claverack to see what it's like to live in it while they market it for sale. The house, relying primarily on design and construction standards based on those developed for low-energy homes in Germany, conserves heat generated by appliances like the refrigerator, that given off by light bulbs and by the home's occupants well enough to sharply reduce the need for additional heat, even in cold weather.

As of the date of our interview—January 15—they hadn't had to turn on the auxiliary heating system once. With the addition of a strong solar component, as in this house whose south facing wall is all glass, the need for supplementary heat is all but eliminated. "We just went through a very cold weekend (Jan 13-15) and were saying, 'well, this may be the time we have to turn the heat on' but we

had bright sun. As long as the sun is out every couple of days, we don't have to turn the heat on."

This collaboration with Wedlick has been very stimulating for Stratton. In the process, he learned a great deal about the cutting edge of high-tech materials and energy-saving building techniques. He was surprised at the energy and enthusiasm with which his crew and sub-contractors embraced this new approach. Although it involved a significant learning curve, he and his crews and subs found the new work challenging and engaging.

"We have lot of time and energy into that project, probably more than we're going to get out of it, if you just look at the dollars, but I went into it knowing that. It was an interesting project that we went into intending to do more." In the four months since the house was finished, interest has continued to build steadily, and Stratton has one similar project in the works and a large number of serious inquiries that may develop into projects with more coming in each week.

Seeing the results in terms of the aesthetics, the engineering, the mechanics of use and installation, and the heightened energy efficiency in a pleasant and liveable home, inspired Stratton and his crew with a sense that this kind of building—competitive in per-square-foot cost with the high-end conventional building practices—is the wave of the future, and with the idea that what they are doing is important, trend-setting work.

The Passive House (Hudson Passive Project, at [www.hudsonpassiveproject.com](http://www.hudsonpassiveproject.com)) has been covered by many major shelter magazines. As the first certified Passive House in the region, it has drawn a great deal of attention from builders and architects, as well as the general public. People who have only read about such designs in the European Press now have a fully-function-

al example right in their own back yard.

Being on the cutting edge of building practice—as well as having a decades-long grounding in conventional building—is one of the things that Stratton believes has enabled his company to weather the current downturn. “People are being more cautious—and I don’t mean money-wise. They’re just being more logical about questions like ‘what do we really need.’ We’re seeing a trend toward that. People are thinking smaller.” With its track-record and flexible approach, Stratton is positioned to work with the whole spectrum of potential clients.

But this new departure is by no means a basket into which Stratton is putting all his eggs. He and his wife, Meg, who owns Classic Country, a home-decorating store located in the hamlet of East Chatham, have continued to buy and renovate/remodel existing homes, most recently (in 2010) a late 19th century home in North Chatham.

They planned the new layout together. Bill and his crews did the structural and mechanical upgrades. Meg chose fixtures, tile, paint colors, counter-tops and all the design elements. They “staged” the house with furniture they chose mostly from Meg’s shop and her resources, and decided that they liked it so well that they considered moving in to it—but it sold before they could execute that plan.

It’s a kind of work they enjoy, engaging their creativity without the restrictions of having to answer to a client, and they’ve been successful at it a number of times, creating renovated homes that people are happy to buy and live in. It’s not a high-profit function of the business at this point, but it does keep them working and the return is sufficient to justify effort. The satisfaction they derive from it is the icing on the cake.

It’s the flexibility Stratton has insisted on that has helped the company continue to succeed. In spite of his success as a new-construction builder in the early part of the decade, Stratton never got wedded to that image of his company and was comfortable making the transition to a focus on a larger number of smaller projects when that was

what the market demanded. Likewise, the Hudson Passive Project was something he was willing to take on, as an investment of time, energy and money in the future of his company and of the building industry.

With what looks like it may be at least a modest rebound in the offing, Stratton feels like he can go with whatever flows. He believes that buildings like the Hudson Passive Project are the wave of the future, but how quickly that wave will break remains to be seen. As it builds, his company is already ahead of the curve and, in the meantime, they have the skills, the knowledge and enthusiasm to meet whatever needs their clients present.

“It’s all about wanting to do a good job,” Stratton says. “It’s very satisfying to build something that’s going to be there for a long time, that’s going to be used—to see people enjoying it.”

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