

# **WEST VIRGINIA HOUSE:** A Union of Two Vernaculars

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Architecture**

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September 2005



**New River Co. coal tipple, Cranberry, West Virginia, c. 1975.**

## **Abstract**

This project uses elements of two architectural vernaculars that were once common in West Virginia.

The agrarian vernacular includes I-houses and barns. The industrial vernacular includes buildings of the timber and coal industries — particularly coal tipples.

My project hopes to reflect the wrenching changes the coming of the Industrial Revolution brought to West Virginia in the decades following the Civil War.

The building is a house in rural Pocahontas County.



*For Granddad,  
VPI class of '05,  
Dad and Mom, Leo and Lilian,  
but most of all, Jeanne.*

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to my committee, Bill Galloway, Jim Jones and Kay Edge, for their help and encouragement.

To Bill, who as Graduate Program chairman, was my first contact with the College of Architecture and who, whether he knows it or not, was instrumental in my decision to leave journalism and pursue a career in architecture.

To Jim, who with Mike O'Brien, was part of that grueling second-year studio, a sort of architecture boot camp. The quantum leap we made in skills, knowledge and confidence that year was amazing.

To Kay, who from my first year in graduate school helped me realize that time spent behind a camera or in the darkroom was not time wasted.

To Professor Hans Rott, one of the most interesting people I've ever met, who can converse on any subject, preferably over lunch. Let him pick the restaurant.

To my late mother and father, who approved of, encouraged and abetted my escape from newspapers to architecture.

To the architect Donald Stark, of Mount Hope, West Virginia, who encouraged me and answered my questions about the profession.

Thanks to Stuart McGehee, of the Eastern Regional Coal Archive in Bluefield, West Virginia, a man who shares my love of coal tipples.

To all my classmates, particularly Greg, Kevin and Sharon, with whom I shared many a gripe and laugh.

Thanks especially to Jim Garden and his wife, Lisa Tucker, who became great friends, and who, because of their similarity to me in age and outlook, provided a wonderful

reality check when I needed it most. It was Jim who told me about the Practices of Preservation class.

To John Kern and Mike Pulice of the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, for giving me an internship with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. I got to do everything from filing negatives to writing the nomination for a historic district. In between, Mike and I visited, measured and photographed any number of old vernacular buildings in Southwest Virginia.

To my mother-in-law, Lucy Curry, whose home introduced me to Pocahontas County, and whose support has been essential. You are truly a good and remarkable person.

To my sister-in-law Janet Curry, who let me turn a room in her house into a studio.

To Leo and Lilian, who have made all this much more difficult but who have tapped in me reserves of love and patience I never knew existed.

And most of all to my wife, Jeanne, without whose support none of this would be possible. You have believed in me from the beginning. Your love and encouragement sustained me through early days of uncertainty, three years of 40-mile commutes and the occasional all-nighter. Not to mention that you did this while having two children and working. You are the greatest.



**New River Co. coal tipple, Cranberry, West Virginia, c. 1975.**

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## Introduction

Drive to my hometown of Beckley, West Virginia, and the overwhelming impression you will get is of sprawl. Most of the mines may be closed, but Wal-Mart is open.

The West Virginia of my youth was no rural idyll. It was, however, overlaid with the trappings of agriculture, and later, industry.

Coal lay under the ground and underlaid the economy. Tipples made of I-beams and corrugated metal — each a confusion of sloping roofs and conveyors — dotted the countryside.

Away from the cities and coal camps, the artifacts of an earlier economy — cleared fields, farmhouses, barns and silos — suggested a life lived at a slower pace. Oddly enough, the farm buildings are surviving better than the industrial ones. Plenty of old barns remain, but the architecture of the coal industry is already getting hard to find.

What I hope to do is preserve a memory of this vanishing West Virginia landscape in some sort of synthesis between the agrarian vernacular and the industrial vernacular forms of the early 20th century.

The vehicle for this quest is a house in the West Virginia countryside.



**New River Co. coal tipple, Cranberry, West Virginia, c. 1975.**

## Tilting at tipples

In the first semester of architecture school, Professor Hans Rott asked for examples of buildings whose shape is determined by their function.

“Coal tipples,” I said.

“What?”

“Coal tipples — er, processing plants. The coal comes out of the hillside, is conveyed downhill, being washed, sorted and loaded into railcars by gravity. They’re everywhere in West Virginia.”

Well, they’re not.

Not anymore, which I would discover during Thanksgiving break when I borrowed a view camera and set off to document this once-ubiquitous building form.

The tipple at Cranberry, where as teenagers we had hunted pigeons and staged BB-gun battles, was gone. The tipple at Skelton, which I had photographed for the high school yearbook back in 1977, was now a used car lot.

My copy of the USGS 7.5-minute topographic map for the Beckley quadrangle shows six tipples; obviously it is out of date.

I drove to the Winding Gulf coalfield in the southern part of Raleigh County, where 20 years before I had traveled those same backroads as a reporter for a weekly newspaper. I rediscovered some interesting churches, but no tipples.

In the spring of 2004, I spent some time at the Eastern Regional Coal Archives in Bluefield, West Virginia, which contains a wealth of historic coal-mining photography, and followed that up with a tipple-hunting trip to McDowell County.

I found no ruins, but I did find a working tipple at Keystone. Someone told me the state has a program to tear down abandoned tipples to solve the problem of liability should someone get hurt poking around the ruins.

A pity. A ruined tipple is a fascinating place.

I have been busy with school as well as a growing family, so my search has been far from exhaustive. But I did find some help online.

The Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), administered by the National Park Service and archived by the Library of Congress, has recorded some tipples. Perhaps the best documented is at Kaymoor, Fayette County, West Virginia, about 25 miles north of Beckley. More than 70 photographs and 20 drawings of the mine and its history are now available online. It is a wonderful piece of documentation.

Pocahontas County, West Virginia, where my project is located, never was coal country. Timber was the big business there in the early 20th century. The town of Cass is nine miles by road from my site. Cass was a lumber town, and the burned-out ruins of its sawmill still exist because the town has been a state park for more than 40 years. The drying kiln, built of I-beams and covered by corrugated metal, looks remarkably like a coal tipple.

Interestingly, the Kaymoor mine and Cass lumber operations had about the same economic lifespan. Kaymoor opened in 1900 and closed in 1962 while Cass opened in 1902 and its lumber operations ceased in 1960.

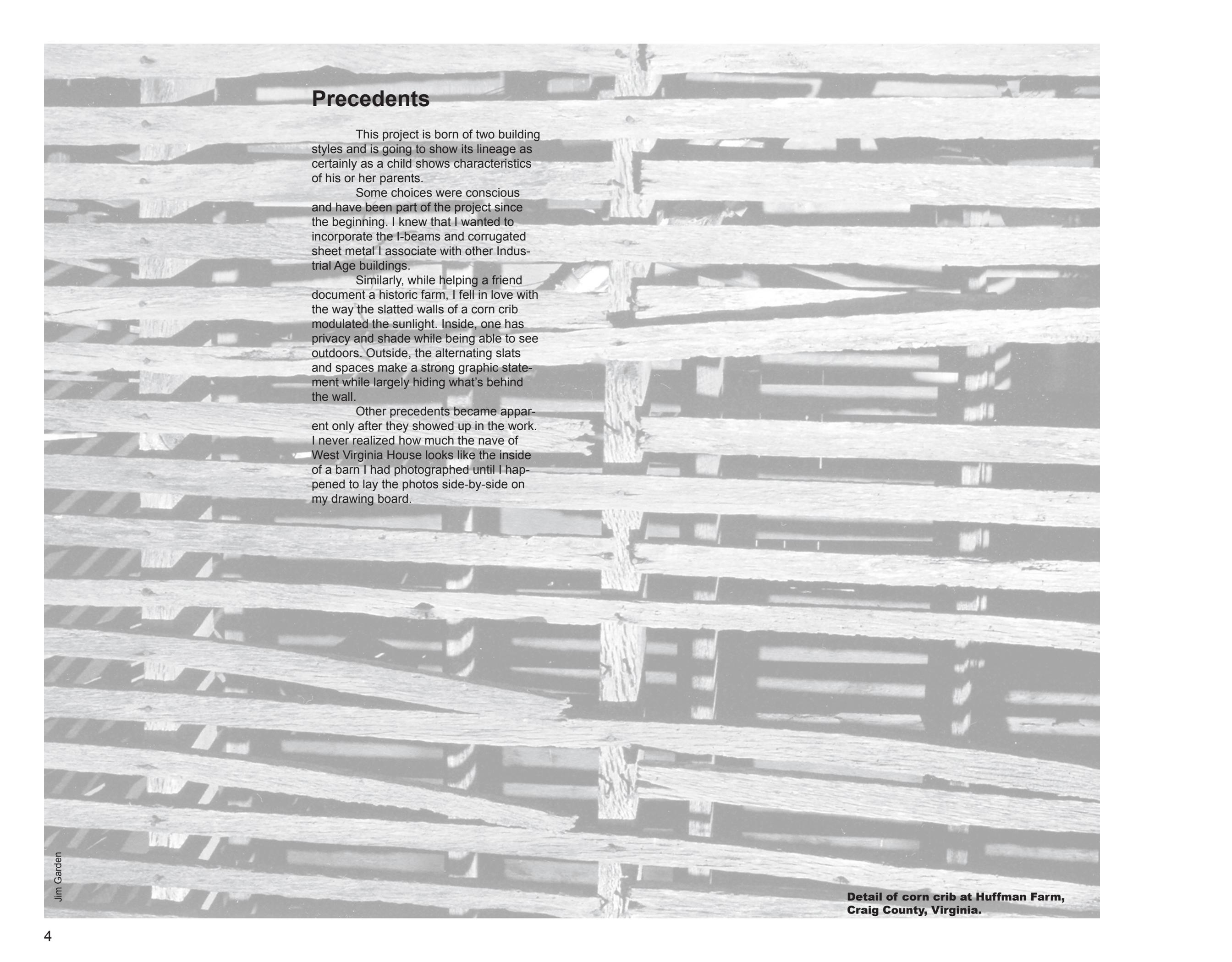
I had nowhere near the problem finding barns that I did finding coal tipples. Barns abound around Blacksburg. A number of excellent examples can be found on Virginia 785 (Catawba Road).

Sadly, it’s obvious some of these will succumb to weather and gravity in the next few years. Closer to Blacksburg, development is proving to be even more detrimental to their survival.

Unlike coal tipples, barns have a large and active constituency and many fine books on them are available. They also are well documented by the Historic American Building Survey (HABS), the sister program of HAER.



**Corn crib, Virginia 785, Montgomery County.**



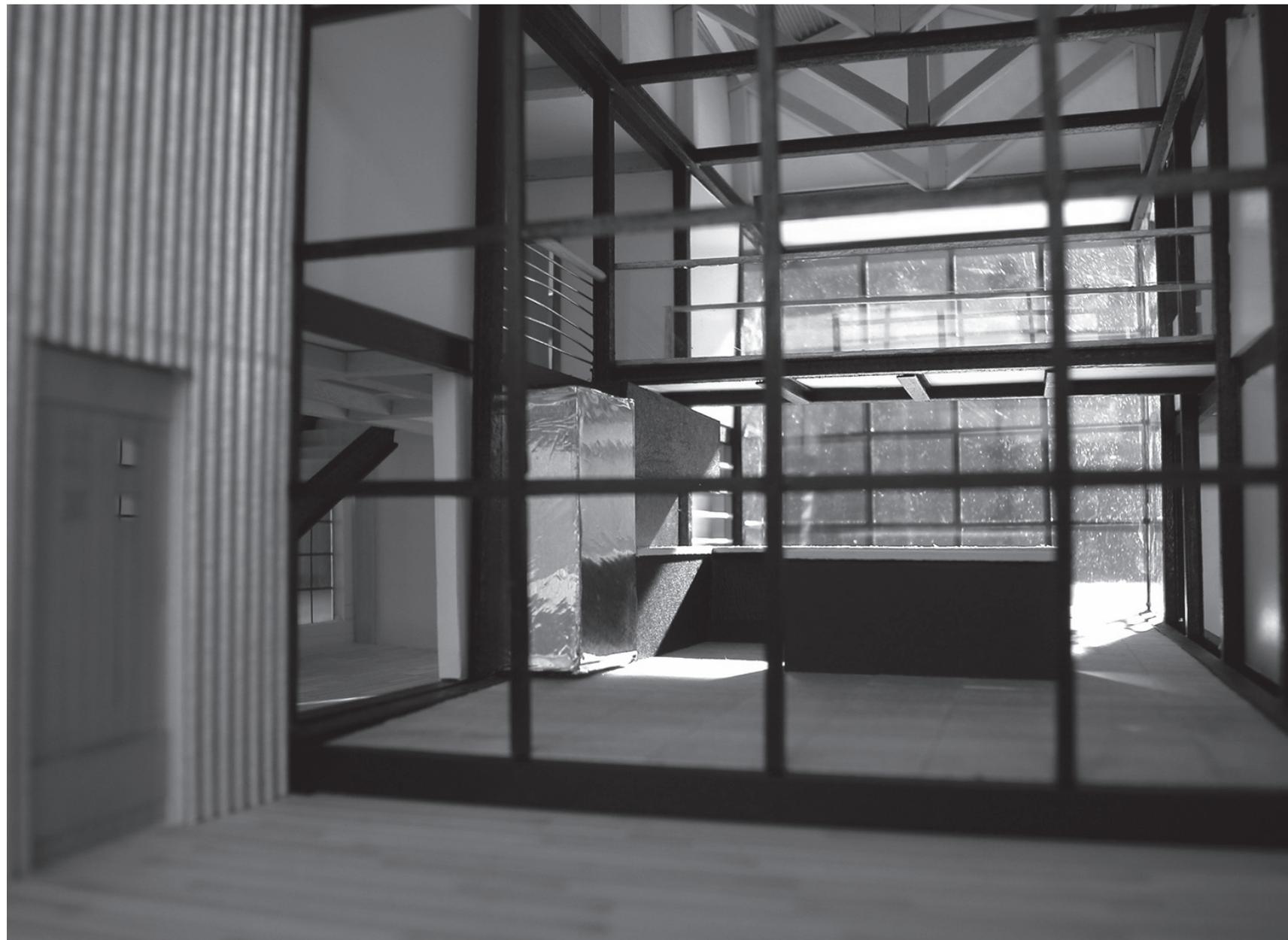
## Precedents

This project is born of two building styles and is going to show its lineage as certainly as a child shows characteristics of his or her parents.

Some choices were conscious and have been part of the project since the beginning. I knew that I wanted to incorporate the I-beams and corrugated sheet metal I associate with other Industrial Age buildings.

Similarly, while helping a friend document a historic farm, I fell in love with the way the slatted walls of a corn crib modulated the sunlight. Inside, one has privacy and shade while being able to see outdoors. Outside, the alternating slats and spaces make a strong graphic statement while largely hiding what's behind the wall.

Other precedents became apparent only after they showed up in the work. I never realized how much the nave of West Virginia House looks like the inside of a barn I had photographed until I happened to lay the photos side-by-side on my drawing board.



**Above left, double log-crib barn, Virginia 785, Montgomery County. In this barn, the pass-through is transverse. In other barns, as in the project house, it is longitudinal.**

**Above right, corrugated metal railroad shack, Roanoke, Virginia. From the beginning, I wanted to incorporate corrugated metal into the project.**

**Left, view of front porch of West Virginia House.**

**Below, interior of barn on Virginia 785, Montgomery County.**

**Right, interior of West Virginia House model.**

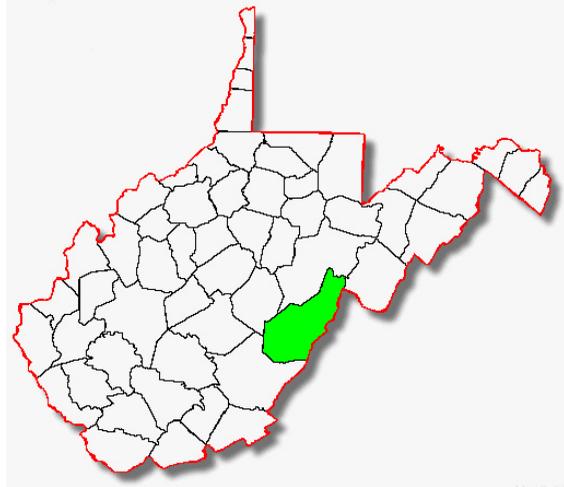




**Top, corn crib on Virginia 311, Sweet Chalybeate, Virginia.**

**Above, lumber kiln, Cass, West Virginia.**

**Left, shading slats on West Virginia House.**



Pocahontas County, West Virginia.

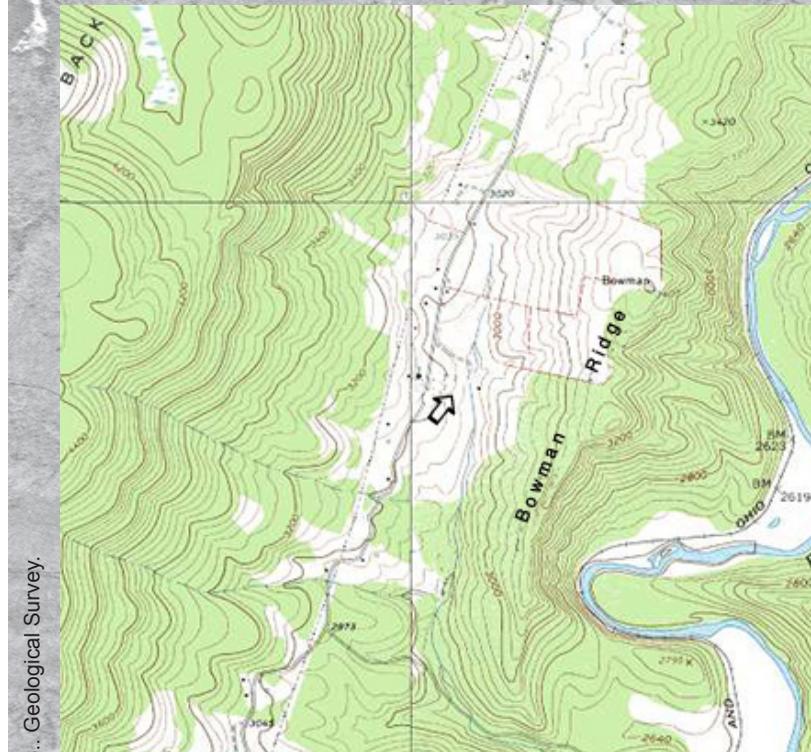
## Site

My site is six miles from the old logging town of Durbin, West Virginia.

It sits at an elevation of about 3,100 feet between Back Allegheny Mountain to the northwest and Bowman Ridge to the south-east.

It is about 15 miles from Elkins, West Virginia, the nearest town for which weather records are kept.

The average high for July is 80. The average low for January is 7, though temperatures of minus 30 have been recorded. Average snowfall for January is 21 inches.



Aerial photograph and map by U.S. Geological Survey.

SECTION THROUGH LOT SHOWING GRADE CHANGE



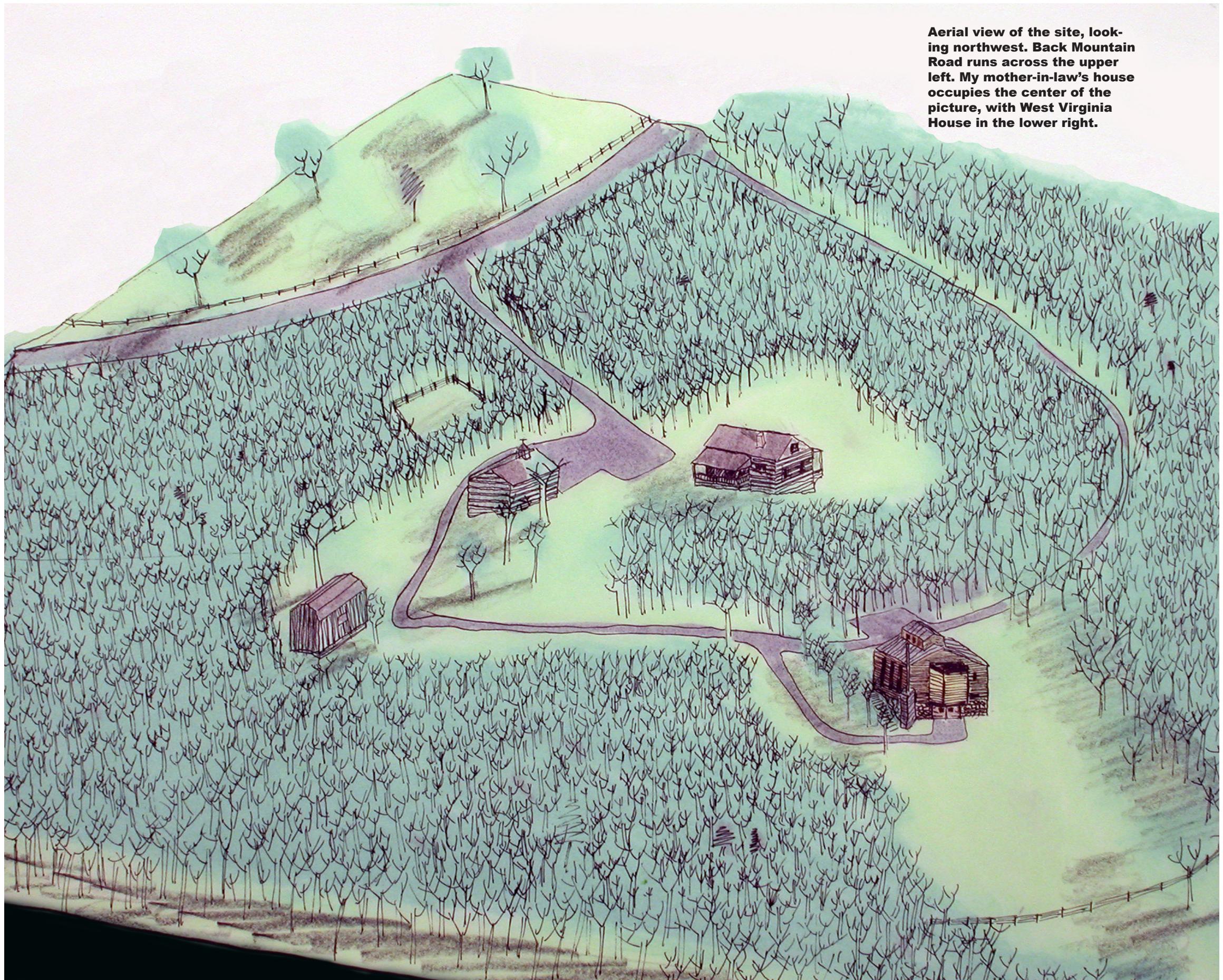


Looking southeast toward Bowman Ridge in early spring, top, and late summer, above.



**Above, looking northwest into the site from the fence line. Far right, wood stacked on the site. Right, stone is abundant in the area.**





**Aerial view of the site, looking northwest. Back Mountain Road runs across the upper left. My mother-in-law's house occupies the center of the picture, with West Virginia House in the lower right.**