

# Clean lines. Timeless.

Red Rock architect Chris Billingham's architectural focus has been primarily residential with an occasional commercial job. He obviously likes designing space and prefers designs that are clean-lined and timeless,



by Leslie Korda

As a kid, being an architect seemed like a good idea to Chris Billingham. And apparently it was, and still is. He is one of several working architects practicing in the Chatham area.

Chris and his wife, Erin Moore, moved to Red Rock in 2000. After living in or near large cities his whole life, it was a bit of culture shock to be in the country where restaurants stop serving at 8:30 and ATMs are a five mile drive away. But for Erin, it was returning to live in her childhood home, and where they now are raising their two children, Preston and Josephine. Upon arriving in Red Rock, he joined the Red Rock Volunteer Fire Company and has held many positions (firefighter, vice-president, president, captain, chief) and currently is an assistant chief. "However, Red Rock being a small department, everyone does everything at some point." Erin is an environmental engineer in Rhinebeck for Tighe & Bond, specializing in providing water design services – clean and dirty – for municipalities.

### Architectural beginnings

But back to the beginning. Billingham's architectural awareness was raised early - he drew houses and built mini cities from Legos. His family lived in a typical suburban house in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and a Cape Cod style house on Long Beach Island, a barrier island on the Jersey shore where his family summered. The differences between vacation houses versus year-round houses and the differing lifestyles lived in each wasn't lost on him, "I noticed people were more willing to take chances on building something a little more beyond the ordinary there."

He ultimately attended Wentworth Institute of Technology, a small private engineering school in Boston, where he earned his Bachelor of Architecture degree. Across the street from Wentworth was The Museum of Fine Arts where he spent a lot of time wandering their vast collection of ancient Greek and Egyptian artifacts, and becoming acquainted with their Impressionist masters. While in school, he worked in the facilities department at the Harvard Business School documenting the buildings on campus to develop and update their library of drawings. "I had fairly unfettered access to all but the most secure areas of the school. I even found myself in a tunnel, halfway under the Charles River one day!"

### Professional path

Before moving to Red Rock, Billingham worked with a residential architect in Boston, and then joined prolific Columbia County architect Kate Johns for several years, before taking a position with James Dixon who still has an office in Chatham. He is grateful to have worked in both offices with great architects and was able to learn a lot from both of their styles. In 2009, several things converged to redirect his career path: the economic downturn caused a decrease in residential construction and the birth of his daughter meant a parent was needed at home. During this time, in addition to providing 'Daddy day-care', he earned a Master's Degree in Education at the College of Saint Rose.



Georgia Kokolis photo



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The background in education has had merits in his field. He has found that the education in education has helped him learn to communicate better with homeowners, "It has been very helpful for me to really understand that not everyone learns the same way, and if something is not getting through, it may be up to me to change how I communicate."

While standing at the proverbial "decision crossroads" of teaching or architecture, the opportunity arose to design a home for a family planning to relocate to the Hudson Valley upon their retirement. Billingham took the more known, creative route and is glad he made the choice he did. A trend he is seeing is the desire for families to have a central place where their far-flung family can congregate as well as a home where they can age in place. He enjoys being able to help people create a space that is right for them now and right for their changing future needs. His projects have been with "interesting homeowners with diverse backgrounds. Some wanting just a few ideas, others needing 'soup to nuts' including help hanging pictures."

### The best parts

What does he like best about being an architect? "Meeting new people, learning how they got to where they are, helping them figure out what they want and how to get what they want. Architecture requires enormous detail in many areas, it's easy to miss things. Learning what's important to them and seeing the finished results. You can't go into someone's house without some level of trust, and certainly go in to make changes, or designing something without a certain level of trust. It can be an intimate relationship learning their preferences, the details of their lives and their personal space."

"I also like being on the job site when construction is happening, meeting the people doing the building who know more about how things are put together because they're out there doing it every day. Drawing on paper is different. I learn something new from every job. And I like when everything is done, seeing how the space works, how people are enjoying and sharing it."

### Clean lines and timelessness

Billingham's architectural focus has been primarily residential with an occasional commercial job. He obviously likes designing space and prefers designs that are clean-lined and timeless, evidenced by the photos on this page. Most of his jobs come by word-of-mouth from client and contractor referrals. "The people coming into this area are lucky to have a lot of options for designers, architects, and contractors. Many of the trades bring a lot of experience and can make their work look like art. There's a lot of talent here and everyone brings something to the table – it's a matter of finding the right relationships."

Most of Billingham's projects have been in Columbia County and occasionally Massachusetts. Currently he has projects in Ghent, Taghkanic, East Chatham, Salt Point in Dutchess County, and is just embarking on another new home design for a family in Hamilton, New York.

Seems like Chris Billingham had a great idea as a kid. ☺