



opening the arks

— Nancy Jack Todd

Another reason — or reasons — for the pressured pace we have experienced over the past year has been the building and completion of the Cape Cod and Prince Edward Island Arks. Taken separately either of these structures or bioshelters, which are described in detail in the section entitled Bioshelters, would have qualified as the biggest single project we had undertaken. Not even Noah was cavalier enough to attempt to launch two Arks at once and his backing was fairly solid. To do so was a stupendous effort particularly on the parts of architect/builders Ole Hammarlund and David Bergmark. Bob Angevine and John Todd had almost equally demanding jobs in administering to the work in progress and, in the case of the Canadian Ark, meeting the deadline of last September 22nd.

Photos by Hilde Maingay



The Cape Cod Ark is a smaller, more modest structure than its Canadian counterpart. Seen from a distance, it has something of the air of a boat beached in a meadow, sitting low and snug. It was opened last August, informally and even somewhat inadvertently. Toward the end of the summer, Hilde, who is definitely the best New Alchemist at celebrations and at honoring the special times that the rest of us might let slip by, proposed an end-of-summer party to which we would all invite our favorite people. We would have it on the lawn and everyone would bring food and musical instruments, if they had them, and we would feast and sing and dance. The Sunday we had chosen turned out to be cloudy and ominous. As we were beginning to set out the tables and people were beginning to arrive, the rain started. We were far too numerous to retreat to the house and the barn had been completely taken over by hydrowind construction. There was the Ark, not yet entirely finished nor too given over to seedlings that it could be devastated by a throng of festive people. So we snatched food, dishes and wine bottles and relayed them across the field to the Ark. There, throughout the intermittent rain, neighbors and old friends, adults and kids feasted and danced to their friends' music and, without quite intending to, opened the Ark.

Photo by Tom Mignone



Photo by Hilde Maingay





Photo by David Bergmark

The opening on Prince Edward Island was completely different. In the first place, we had a deadline set by the Canadian Federal Government who had funded it. Secondly, it was expected that Prime Minister Trudeau would officially open it, and a date had been set to coincide with a scheduled trip he was to make to the Island. Unlike the impromptu Cape opening, this was a race, ultimately a feverish one, with time. Jay Baldwin described the whole adventure aptly and well in the Fall '76 issue of the *CoEvolution Quarterly*. But, because it was such a singular event in the lives of so many of us, perhaps it won't seem redundant to tell the story once again from another point of view.

The idea of an Ark for Prince Edward Island has been around for quite a while. The original proposal was mailed to the Canadian government in late November, 1974. The early design work was done by Hilde Maingay and Earle Barnhart. Their plans were passed on to Ole Hammarlund and David Bergmark who, together, in the guise of Solsearch International, are Architecture's answer to New Alchemy. They evolved the final design over the period of the next year. Because negotiations are always a lengthy business, the ground for the foundation of the structure was not broken until October, 1975. Construction began immediately. Before the snow began, there was just enough framing up to

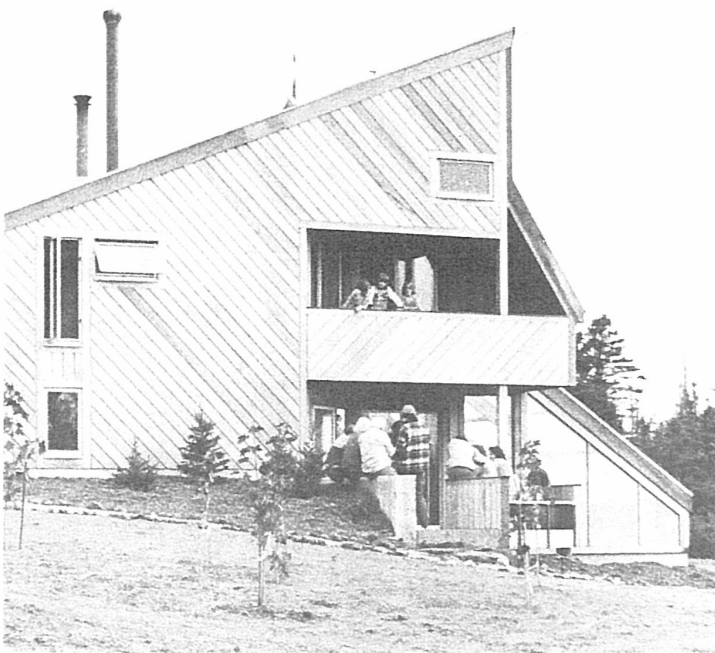


Photo by Hilde Maingay



Photos by Hilde Maingay

which plastic could be tacked to provide enough shelter to keep going. David Bergmark worked with an Island crew all that winter, with Ole dividing his time between the Island and the Cape. By spring and an initial government inspection in May, the building had taken shape. In fact, to the uninitiated, it didn't seem there could be that much left to do. The rooms had been enclosed, much of the built-in furniture was in place and the living room had been panelled. But a bioshelter is a complex structure. In addition to the wiring, plumbing, flooring and painting need-

Photo by Robert Todd



ed to complete a standard house, there are such extras as installation of solar collectors and the building of heat storage chambers. The physical systems have to be fairly well complete before the living systems are added. With the coming of summer, the pace increased and was made no less frantic by the unending stream of visitors, both tourists and well-wishers, authorized and otherwise. The very real courtesy of Nancy Willis and David Bergmark, who managed to receive people with trowels and hammers in hand, was the main reason that the project continued to progress throughout the summer. The influx of help in terms of numbers didn't really begin until the first week of September, although people had been commuting between both centers much of the time. But from that week until the opening, the number of people that turned up and the intensity and dedication of the work was remarkable. Toward the end, many of us were working twenty-hour days and subsisting largely on caffeine. There were periods where I'm not sure whether David or Ole ever found a chance to sleep. Most of the time, it seemed preposterous that we should ever be ready on time.

As it has always been with New Alchemy gatherings, the people who arrived, for whatever reasons, were varied and wonderful. Many of the long-haired young appeared in vans, on foot or with packsacks. Of these, a few really wanted to be part of things enough to work. They stayed, some of them proving invaluable. Others watched for a while, then left. Old friends came and neighbors from the Woods Hole community, summer people, relatives, families and long-time fellow travellers like Steward Brand and Kathl and Jay Baldwin. Academics wielded hammers and paint brushes beside poets and homesteaders. Island neighbors gave up their Sundays to stay on the job.

With the number of days dwindling to less than a week, the intensity seemed to increase exponentially. In ways, it was the closest experience any of us are likely to have to participating in an ant colony. Definite patterns began to emerge. People were greeted exuberantly on arrival. They would spend an hour or so looking around and then were absorbed into the dynamic, becoming contributing members of the humming, ordered pattern, the organization of which was not discernible to the casual eye. It was not uncommon to see an undone but essential task undertaken, carried out and completed almost as one watched, rather like time-lapse photography. Forty-eight hours before the opening, virtually no landscaping had been done, beyond an earlier seeding of the immediate area to grass, which was just beginning to germinate. The Ark was surrounded by rutted mud. In the intervening time, the front walk was gravelled and smoothed, shrubs were dug up from the fields and transplanted, rocks were hauled from the beach for walkways, paths were laid

out and lined with stones and a seaweed mulch was spread over the exposed ground. Solemn industrious lines of people raked or trekked seaweed or lugged rocks. Another crew painted window frames and venting hatches. The biologists and their assistants worked with the solar-algae ponds, fending off enthusiastic children who had slightly different ideas about the purpose and flow of aquatic systems. The only major failing in managing such goal-oriented yet diffuse operations was that we had made no provision for meals — leaving individuals or groups to fend for themselves. People often worked until they were exhausted before they took a break to eat. A food crew could as easily have been organized as any of the others and, should we undertake a similar extravaganza, it will not be without some organization for food.

In spite of sporadic meals, the hours ticked by and one by one the jobs were completed. Complicated ones, like installing the sprinkling system in the greenhouse, which kept Jay and Kathl aloft on the scaffolding for several days, were eventually finished as well as more domestic ones like sanding and polishing the living room floor, which was done between one and four on the morning of the fateful day by Michaela Walsh, Ole, a large unidentified bearded fellow who knew how to do everything, and myself. By ten that morning the living quarters were declared ready for interior decorating. In the same final hours, the hydrowind crew, consisting



Photo by David Bergmark



of Ty Cashman and Vince Dempsey, who had spent several weeks being buffeted on the windmill tower, made their final adjustment while Al Doolittle monitored the controls and in a final burst of glory – or effort – the hydrowind pumped electricity into the Island utility grid for the first time.

Mr. Trudeau's arrival was scheduled for one-thirty. At twelve-thirty, we pronounced ourselves finished and scattered to change. In addition to inadequate food arrangements, there were virtually no washing facilities for the group, which now amounted to a hundred or so. We had all been living in tents or vans and were thoroughly coated in paint, dirt, fire smoke, grease, or any combination of the above. The nearest available showers were at Brudenell, the provincial camp grounds, and those of us who did not descend on Nancy Willis and her household (by then more than twenty) gathered kids and went off to wash there. It probably wasn't the first time Mr. Trudeau has been greeted by people with paint-encrusted fingernails, and most



of us were careful not to display our hands or gesticulate too lavishly. If he noticed turpentine to be the predominant perfume, he was too polite to comment.

More or less ready, more or less dressed, somewhat cleaner than we had been in some time, with the Ark functional and gleaming, the lot of us, New Alchemists and friends, in the company of several hundred Islanders and the inevitable swarm of media, were clustered and gazing skyward by the time the two helicopters bearing Mr. Trudeau and Premier and Mrs. Campbell of Prince Edward Island appeared in the sky. The children shrieked and surged in the tornado of the landing. The dignitaries disembarked, made their way through the throng and across the field, and the official opening began. Mr. Trudeau, Mr. Campbell, Arthur MacDonald and John Todd



spoke briefly and appropriately on the meaning of the occasion. It was clear that Mr. Trudeau understood the implications of what we are trying to do. He read aloud the words on the plaque that dedicates the Ark and in doing so placed it into time. The bioshelter became a reality – another possibility open to us should we choose to make use of it.

With the formalities over, Mr. Trudeau and the Campbells were given a fairly detailed tour and explanation of the Ark and its workings. Because

there was not enough space for everyone to come through at once, our neighbors Ethyl Blackett and Tommy Banks sang and played for everyone. Others of our neighbors had prepared refreshments — all the more welcome for the recent dearth of food among us. Mr. Trudeau snacked and chatted with the Islanders who had come to see him before his aides whisked him away and he was whirled off into the sky again. Our friend, Bill Thompson, has said that, by opening the Ark and thereby acknowledging the possibility of an alternative course for the future, Mr. Trudeau performed the most significant act by a major political figure in the last decade. It is impossible for any of us to be objective, but to have been there and noted Mr. Trudeau's flexibility and his grasp of the ideas embodied in the Ark was heartening.

The opening did not end with the departure of the helicopters. That night brought a celebration by Island neighbors, the visiting work crew and the rest of us in fine New Alchemy tradition. Our neighbors provided the music and everyone danced with everyone — kids and government officials, hippies and farmers and professors — all jounced about the packed living room until after midnight. Such was the height of the cheer

that conversations could be maintained only by shouting or retiring. It was a glorious catharsis.

There had been something else planned to round out the opening ceremonies which, to many of us, was the most important part — a silent sunrise vigil on the morning of the autumn equinox. But dawn that morning brought the rain that we had been holding at bay by sheer will all the preceding day. It slid off the sides of the tents in sheets. It was wet and dismal and most of us were too tired to move. We waited and later that day, after we had restored the Ark from the ravages of the previous night, we gathered again to finish the opening. David Spangler of the Lorien Association had been asked to come for this part. We sat in a circle in the living room and he spoke quietly and simply, articulating, as few of us could have, what we hoped the Ark and ideas like it might come to mean — of a dream of a renewed understanding of the larger patterns of life and of the human place within such patterns.

With this, our house was consecrated and the opening was complete. People began to pack and to leave, rather quietly. I don't think that anything quite like those few days, either in the intensity of the preparations or of the headiness of the celebrations, is likely to happen to us too often.

Photo by David Bergmark

