



Since coming home to the Berkshires, the architects of Group AU—who happen to be husband and wife—are transforming the landscape with their innovative ideas and a deep appreciation for the land and its history.

# BREAKING NEW GROUND

BY CHRISTOPHER MARCISZ

The old Williamsville Inn on Route 41 is undergoing a transformation—and yet, with a quick glance, it won't look much different than when it was built in 1797. The two-story white Colonial house will still appear to be a model of traditional New England design and practicality nestled in the West Stockbridge countryside. But when work wraps up later this year, the Heirloom Lodge, as it will be known, will feature a new dimension: a modern

glass-walled addition with an open kitchen and patio leading to gardens and paths to beckon guests. The architects, Tessa Kelly and Chris Parkinson, have made finding this balance between old and new their life's work. Their practice, shaped by training and experience, is to celebrate the local landscape and history while finding new ways to grow and live in this space. It comes naturally to these Berkshire natives who chose to come back to build their

PHOTO: STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN



professional and family lives here, and to demonstrate a new approach to their field.

On a recent site visit—as crews worked around the hollowed-out old building and ran saws for joists of the new deck and expansion—the couple focused on the details, pointing out which chimneys could still be used, discussing the composite steel flooring that helped support the dining room and provide headroom for the wine cellar.

But they also talked about the land, how the project fits in to the client's story, and what it brings to the region as a whole. The property will become what Kelly described as a “food campus,” a space with fine dining and locally sourced products—including ingredients from the property's own gardens—for residents and visitors alike.

“We’re designing something to tell a new story about the Berkshires,” Kelly said. A story about history, reinvention, and community.

The client for the Heirloom Lodge project is Matt Straus, a restaurateur best known for his Heirloom Café in the Mission District of San Francisco. Straus described Kelly and Parkinson as “exceptionally astute, exceptionally creative, and exceptionally good listeners.” He didn’t know much about architecture, and they had never designed a restaurant before, so he said there was a lot

of meeting in the middle. “We’ve both asked hundreds if not thousands of questions along the way,” he said.

Since Kelly and Parkinson returned in 2016, their firm, Group Architecture and Urbanism (Group AU), has quickly become one of the most exciting voices in design in the Berkshires. They take on projects to transform and revitalize public places like parks in Pittsfield, and pursue grant-funded art projects like The Mastheads, which brings writers for retreats in custom-designed portable cabins. In addition to their public-facing projects, Group AU steadily built a thriving business designing and renovating private homes, including some intriguing historic preservation projects.

The business is located in a loft studio over a garage at the couple's house on Pontoosuc Lake. And the pair's story began in the Berkshires, as well. Parkinson grew up in Williamstown, and remembers how easily one could move between fields, forests, reservoirs, and rivers, which shaped how he thinks about design problems. “I always start by thinking about the land,” he said.

Kelly grew up in Pittsfield (she's the granddaughter of Jim Kelly, who was the owner-operator of Brodie Mountain Ski Resort), born after the era when General

Electric thrived then closed, after the despair and uncertainty that came next.

“I never saw the booming Pittsfield people slightly older than me remember,” she said. “I never saw it go into that downturn. My mindframe has always been: Let's try to build this up.”

The pair met when they were 15, as students at Mount Greylock Regional High School. They went separate ways for college—she to Williams, he to Amherst—and only reconnected late in their college years. By that time they had separately decided to pursue careers as architects; Kelly went to Harvard Graduate School of Design, and Parkinson to the Yale School of Architecture.

Much of architecture training begins with a focus on big, expensive projects by “starchitects” like Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and others. But what resonated for them were the ideas of architects like Rem Koolhaas, who, in addition to creating major projects, described a new way of thinking about buildings as not isolated physical structures, but parts of the social and natural landscape.

Kelly and Parkinson are part of a generation of architects who have built on that thinking. Rather than concentrating

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—TESSA KELLY

on big-city, high-profile work, they often create in smaller markets with a more local focus. This means seeking sustainable ways to use materials and deeply listening to clients and community members who have ideas and stories that can be harnessed to create something new.

As part of her thesis project in 2011, Kelly combined her background studying literature and art history in college and her interest in her hometown to propose what would become The Mastheads. The project created a series of portable writing cabins that could be placed around the Berkshires, accessing the region's rich literary history while fostering an environment for artists to make new work.

“What can I personally start doing; what's available to a young architect?” Kelly said about coming up with the project. “What ideas or histories are embedded in the landscape that we can turn into architecture?”

**Below: The Mastheads project that brought Tessa and Chris back home to the Berkshires creates spaces to celebrate the Berkshires' literary past while welcoming new writers to become a part of it.**



A rendering of the still-in-progress Heirloom Lodge. It will respect the historic 1797 structure and create new possibilities in a brand-new, modern space.

HEIRLOOM LODGE: DIGITAL RENDERING COURTESY OF GROUP AU; TESSA AND CHRIS: STEPHANIE ZOLSHAN







Left: Westside Riverway Park was designed to unite the “social and ecological,” by connecting a historic Pittsfield neighborhood with the Housatonic River, with spaces for gatherings and native plants.

Below: Alphabet Park in Pittsfield’s Morningside neighborhood features 26 concrete sculptural forms, one for each letter.



WESTSIDE RIVERWAY PARK: IWAN BAAH; ALPHABET PARK: BEN GARVER

In 2014, the couple was living in New Haven, Connecticut, each working for a different firm, when the idea earned a National Endowment for the Arts grant to make it happen. At first thinking they could do it remotely, they decided it would need a more hands-on approach. And so they came home.

While Parkinson said there is no roadmap for building a career in architecture and that “everybody has their own weird origin story,” a common track for an ambitious young architect is to work for years for a big firm, as a cog in a giant machine for designing. Setting off on their own gave the couple a fast-track to learning hands-on how to do all aspects of the job.

That included being a contractor, a designer, occasionally a community leader, and eventually a manager of their own small business. It meant grant writing, community listening sessions, conversations with clients, instructions for contractors, and managing budgets and timelines.

They built on the success of The Mastheads with several other public projects, like a redesign of Pittsfield’s Westside Riverway Park and the “Alphabet Park” at Kellogg Park in the Morningside neighborhood. While taking on straightforward contract work to pay the bills—ADA compliance and fire safety

projects—their reputation continued to grow, earning them more and more private home contracts.

Talent is one thing, but there’s no substitute for the experience of taking charge of these projects from top to bottom. Parkinson described the know-how as “orchestrating and directing this massive, slow process into something focused and consistent. You are just trying to keep this huge thing moving forward,” he said.

Today they have two employees—who work remotely from New York—and 12 projects under way this past summer.

And they’re balancing all this with the job of being parents. Their first daughter, Eve, arrived as they were launching The Mastheads; their second, Ray, is 4. A day in the life can entail traveling to different sites—often in opposite directions—but always making sure at least one of them can wrap up when school gets out at 3:30.

“We end up being in the same place at the same time much less than you’d expect,” Parkinson joked.

Having become leaders in their field, they are eager to share what they’ve

learned. Both have taught graduate classes—he at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and she at Yale and Princeton.

Kelly recalled being surprised at the interest in their work in Pittsfield, and is excited about what she hears from aspiring architects. One student talked about a plan for a series of bike paths in their suburban Ohio hometown, a different kind of ambition from designing signature concert halls and office towers in New York or London.

“I’m excited about the idea of young architects planting themselves all over the place, figuring out ways to make interesting design happen outside the big cities,” said Kelly.

It’s an idea that Group AU has planted in the Berkshires, and they’re here to help it grow.



HOUSE: STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN

## Saving a Piece of the Past



The story of Agrippa Hull is an important part of the history of Stockbridge, but the Cherry Hill Road house he poured decades of hard work and his life savings into was in danger of being lost. When Hans and Kate Morris bought the land with Hull’s original early-nineteenth-century farmhouse, it had already been badly damaged by a mudslide and obscured by later additions.

“I wasn’t sure exactly what we’d do with the house, but I knew it was owned by Agrippa Hull,” Hans Morris said. “He deserves a higher profile in the history of Stockbridge.”

Hull was a free Black man born in Northampton and raised in Stockbridge; he volunteered for the Continental Army at the start of the Revolutionary War when he was 17. He was an orderly and trusted messenger for General Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who was a Polish nobleman on Washington’s staff.

After the war, he came back to his hometown and, while working for Theodore Sedgwick, a young lawyer from a prominent family, began buying land. Eventually Hull acquired 84 acres below the Housatonic River.

One historian described Hull as the “ideal of a civic-minded and self-sustaining yeoman farmer.” He was known around town as “Grippy,” and maintained his farm, kept horses and milk cows, and cultivated an apple orchard. Elizabeth Freeman—also known as Mumbet, the first enslaved person to win her freedom in Massachusetts court—was one of his neighbors.

Morris, who is chairman of the board of The Berkshire Eagle, which publishes The B, hired Kelly and Parkinson to salvage what they could of the original house and plan an addition.

Kelly said they approached the project thinking not just “about repairing an old building, [but] asking how the idea of restoration can be a launch point.”

The work began with removing

several additions to the property and stripping the piece back down to its original footprint. “We’re not adding [to the historic piece], we’re selectively subtracting,” Kelly said. The entire structure was moved further up onto the property, away from the road.

The historic structure will have a new building connected via a walkway. It will present a stone façade toward the road, but glass and windows facing in. The Morris’ daughter will use the light, open space as an art studio.

“The new building is not trying to be a reproduction,” Parkinson said. “It will speak to the existing building.”

Morris said he got to know Kelly and Parkinson through The Mastheads project and noticed their commitment to doing good work, and to the Berkshires.

“I admire their energy to create something new,” he said. “It’s very diligent and respectful and gets to the facts of what is important about it, all while tying in new elements in an innovative and beautiful way.” **B**