



A place that doesn't need us

Artist Jeff Wetzig builds an off-the-grid house in Wisconsin in order to escape the noise and combat consumerism.

By Sarah Bakeman

Jeff Wetzig held a chainsaw in one hand. He revved it up, focusing his eyes on the shady maple tree in front of him. It wasn't diseased like the other trees he'd cleared, nor was it dangerously leaning toward the timber frame house he'd built. In fact, Wetzig usually spent his mornings tapping the tree and making coffee from the sap.

Despite being the family's "yard tree," as of last year it had become an obstacle for the newly-installed solar panels on the side of the house. Its lofty branches filtered the sun, leaving little power for the chest refrigerator inside. As the chainsaw ripped apart the bark, his wife and two kids shed tears.

"It was a hard thing to cut a friend," Wetzig said. "I didn't have time to cry. I was trying to not die from a chainsaw."

In 2011, Wetzig and his wife Christy bought a plot of rocky, wooded land in Wisconsin. They wanted a summer escape from their Minneapolis home that required nothing more than a tent, a car ride and some food. As they spent the night, sounds of traffic and music were replaced by the ambient noise of a gentle breeze and unknown animals rustling in the darkness.

The startling sound of wildlife inspired Wetzig's first project: a screen house.

It was a tiny, screened-in building with a stove inside, built next to the maple tree. It allowed them to store pots, pans and sleeping bags as well as providing peace of mind as they tried to sleep.

"It allowed us to go there a lot more," Wetzig said. "If we kept enough wood in the stove, it would be comfortable. Then we

would sit around having coffee in the mornings, and we would start to dream about things."

Years earlier, when Wetzig was buying his first house, he decided he wanted a fixer-upper. After three failed attempts at restoring a home to his liking, he figured he didn't like picking up after others' sloppy work. He then spent mornings with Christy in their Minneapolis home, filling quarter-inch sheets of grid paper with sketches of houses they'd entitled "coffee dreams." Sometimes they added a garden or solar panels, or they wondered how many acres of wilderness would surround them.

"We wanted to live in a place that doesn't need us," Wetzig said. "When I was living in our house in Minneapolis, I was aware that the property needed me on some level. I had to mow the lawn because the property and neighbors require it. But when your neighbors are squirrels and deers and bears, they don't really need you to do anything."

After the Wisconsin property had been purchased and coffee dreams turned into finalized plans, Wetzig spent mornings pedaling over the Lowry Bridge and down East River Road to Bethel University, where he works as an art professor. In the span of a decade, he went through a fixed gear bike that didn't agree with his knees and an ELF solar and pedal powered hybrid vehicle, but mainly relied on his three-speed bike.

The commute took 50 minutes, but sometimes 40 if he had the right mix of motivation and green lights. Pedaling meant he'd accomplished something before he'd even started his workday,

especially if he had to slosh through snow and ice.

As cars whizzed by, the morning bike ride forced Wetzig to move a little slower. He saw objects such as soggy couches, busted workout equipment and pieces of plywood littering roadsides. No matter how dilapidated or weather-damaged they were, the objects had one thing in common: a handmade “free” sign attached to the surface. Wetzig would squeeze the handlebars of his bike, pull out his phone and snap a picture before continuing on his way.

After months of foraging for free items, Wetzig began to turn the photos into artwork using a watercolor variation of Japanese woodblock printing. He found himself becoming fascinated with the objects themselves, but also imagining who the owners were and why the objects had become so worthless to them.

As he gained more photos than he could possibly use, the project’s roots became clear: consumerism.

“There’s a beginning of that euphoria of getting a new thing,” said Wetzig. “At the end of it, it sits out on the curb and you hope somebody will just take it away so you don’t have to deal with it... putting it out on the curb with a free sign allows [us] to assuage guilt.”

On the seat of his bike, Wetzig identified the question of American consumers: “can abundance be enough?”

He decided he wanted his Wisconsin home to be an experiment with the question “can enough be abundance?”

Between work days and art projects, Wetzig spent weekends on his land in Wisconsin. The screenhouse was soon accompanied by a kiln with a timber frame surrounding it. It served as a workspace for his potter wife, but also as a practice run for the larger-scale timber frame that would become the family home.

Starting in 2016, Wetzig spent his summers commuting to the property, working until he missed his kids too much. Usually, that meant three-day spurts. Nonetheless, he finished the foundation and the timber frame.

After two years of commuting back and forth, Wetzig and Christy bought the old firehouse in the nearest town, converting the first floor into a studio, the second into an apartment and leaving behind Minneapolis, their home and the art and culture surrounding it.

“It meant that I could sleep in my own bed and get even better

sleep at night,” Wetzig said. “And I could start earlier in the day and work later in the night and still see my family.”

Wetzig spent hot summer days strapped to the top of the timber frame, filling in the roof. He calls the day the roof was completed the biggest day of his life, besides his wedding and the birth of Mercy and Abel, his children.

The summer of 2019 was spent plastering the inside and outside of the house, leaving a white finish and the individual hand strokes visible on the walls. Initials and handprints were left carved into the doorway. When the plaster dried in the fall, Christy was ready for the next step.

“It’s a house, it’s time to move in,” she said. “If you wait until you’re ready to do things, you’ll wait forever.”

So they loaded the car up with the necessities: mattresses, clothes and Legos. Mercy and her younger brother, Abel, wouldn’t consider the tool-filled building a home without the brightly-colored plastic bricks.

Two years later, the tools have been cleared. Upon entering, the main floor of the house has no walls separating rooms. An alternating wooden staircase leads up to Mercy and Abel’s rooms in the loft. A stove sits in the middle of the floor, warming the two worn, red antique armchairs in front of it. Mercy recalls her parents taking her to a history museum and seeing the same model of chair in an exhibit.

“I sit in those every day,” she said.

To the right of the stove, there’s a piano keyboard, a bed for Wetzig and Christy and a couple of rows of books containing stories, recipes and school materials that Christy teaches the kids. A rope hangs down from the ceiling, and Abel will often climb it to nestle himself in the crevice of the “Y”-shaped beam. The supporting beams were left raw, resembling tree trunks growing through the floor.

“To cut down trees ... means you are affecting the landscape for years,” Wetzig said. “All the trees we cleared became part of the house.”

To the left of the stove, there’s a kitchen lined with rough-edged wooden shelves made by Wetzig. Jars filled with mushrooms foraged from the property are placed in rows above stacked plates and cups sculpted by Christy: the ones that failed to sell.

Plants from Wetzig’s garden



raspberries



hazelnuts



garlic



cherries



maples



apples



shiitakes



"The people who buy most of their things at Target and Walmart, they think [the pottery] should be perfect, like machine made," Wetzig said.

At the back of the kitchen there's a doorway overlooking the screenhouse and the stump of the maple tree.

The building has been made into a home since the family's 2019 arrival. A greenhouse sits out front, preventing their collected rainwater from freezing in the winter. Patches of berries, nuts and mushrooms are grown throughout the property. On the side of the house, there's a pizza oven built from the leftover bricks from Christy's kiln.

The couple plans to build a screen porch on the side of the house. That project comes after Wetzig rebuilds the shabby,

dilapidated shed he calls "a trial for an artist [to see]." But that comes after he finished building a sauna in the backyard, wiring the house, fixing up his studio, making bookshelves, grading his students' assignments and putting a wall in to separate his bedroom from the rest of the main floor.

For now, one of Wetzig's winter projects will be building a kitchen table for the family to sit around. He'll use the wood from the maple tree he cut down a year ago. Wetzig hopes the tap marks will be visible as the family eats dinner.

Designed by Joy Sporleder

Above: The Wetzig timber-frame home stands in its second year of being a full-time residence, with solar panels, a greenhouse and a water tank out front.

| Photo by Bryson Rosell