

Dachniki

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All Eliza Doolittle wanted was a room somewhere. A room.

Woody Guthrie, in one of his Columbia River ballads, noted, “folks runnin’ round all over creation, just lookin’ for some kind of a little place”. A room, a place.

John Prine, a singer songwriter we lost to the pandemic last year, suggested where one might build that place. He said, “blow up your TV, throw away your papers, move to the country, build you a home”.

A room, a place, a home in the country. Advice that I have taken to heart. You will see that advice manifest in a hardwood forest in Indiana next week at our annual outing.

So, the first question before us might be, why? Why did I do this? I have a perfectly serviceable home in the city. Why did this happy city mouse want to be a country mouse also? Why did this aging urbanite want to explore a second life as a country squire?

I don’t think the fossil record provides any clues. Perhaps archaeologists have uncovered some evidence but with or without the benefit of scientific support, here is my hypothesis.

I can’t help but think that sometime in the history of our species, after our distant ancestors first crawled out of the primordial swamp and found shelter in a cave, it wasn’t that much later in our evolution before a restless caveman, perhaps while poking at the fire, said to his cavewoman “wouldn’t it be nice dear, to have a second cave near a creek that we could go to on the weekends”?

There we have it. The desire for a second house. Some but not all of us assembled here tonight have been afflicted by this notion. Some of you have successfully fought off this temptation. I salute your strength. Others, including me, gave in to this very curious, very human desire.

The concept of a second place. comes in many forms, a cabin, a cottage, or an estate. The robber barons had their “cottages” in Newport, Rhode Island, and later their compounds in Florida. In a bit of a reversal, the landed gentry in England soon required town houses in London, to complement their ancestral holdings.

Patrician Cincinnatians for generations have headed north to Michigan in the summer and south to the West Coast of Florida in the winter.

Even among my crowd, the great unwashed of the westside of Cincinnati, it was not unheard of for a neighbor to have a “camp” along the Little Miami or the Whitewater River, or somewhere

in the nearby rural counties of Indiana. Sunday afternoons were spent fishing, playing cards, and tossing horseshoes. The evenings were spent around a campfire. As a child I spent many a lazy hazy crazy day of summer at my mother's side in such a setting.

In fact, it was because of this tradition that I acquired my property. I first visited the forest that will surround us next week over 60 years ago, when I was about eight years old. Friends invited my mother and me to spend a Sunday (after church of course) in the country at their cabin retreat. I spent my time tramping in the woods and flipping rocks in the creek looking for crayfish.

Imagine my delight, 30 years later when those now elderly friends ask my mother if her "boy" Jerry would have any interest in buying their place. I was by then approaching middle age with kids of my own. I jumped at the chance.

The cabin and woods served my family well for the next 25 years, hosting my kid's soccer teams and classmates. The kids played soccer in the field or disappeared into the forest. I now stood among the overworked parents, standing around the campfire.

Moving closer to recent years, I was struggling to adjust to my status as an empty nester. I was also aware that retirement was looming. I was at an inflection point.

Now what? What sort of project was I up for? Start an echo career? Learn a new language? Take guitar lessons? The answer came as I was strolling through a clearing in my woods with fellow literarian Paul Shortt. It was the most expensive walk of my life. I boldly told Paul that I wanted to build a dacha.

Now what exactly is a dacha? I've already established that the desire for a second place seems to be imbedded in the human condition – at least for some humans. As it happens the Russians have taken this to an art form. A dacha is a defining feature of traditional Russian culture, along with vodka, borscht and caviar - not contemporary Russian culture, mind you, which is more readily defined by the invasion of adjacent sovereign nations or the occasional poisoning of political adversaries.

But why would I, of all people, want to build a dacha? I have already made the case for a second home. Why would I choose to call my second home a dacha?

I have since my youth been a bit of a Russophile. That sentence reads more awkwardly this spring than it did when I wrote it last fall. Vlad the Invader has tragically changed the narrative for all things Russian. Russia today has at best a fractured identity. That's how Stephen Kotkin, professor of history at Princeton University, describes it. Russia is a world class power culturally and scientifically. Politically and economically, however, they have built a decrepit system today based on coercion and corruption.

But alas, we are literary men. Let's focus for a moment, on the achievements of the great Russian writers. It is the sweeping themes of 19th century Russian literature that captured my imagination and formed the basis for my Russophilia.

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy explores sweeping themes of faith, family and marriage along with betrayal and desire, all within the context of imperial Russian society. Of note, given tonight's topic, he also explores dimensions of rural life versus city life.

Dostoyevsky explores a different landscape altogether, the human mind. Anguish, paranoia, disgust and confusion abound in the squalor and human wretchedness of city life in imperial St. Petersburg.

Love, betrayal, crime, punishment and yes, war and peace are among the grand themes of Russian literature.

I might add, that beyond the literary canon, the vastness of the land and the drama of its history also made Russia a source of endless fascination for me.

Given that fascination, you can certainly understand that I was quite thrilled forty years ago when I met a young Russian gal who was a design intern at my new place of work. Co-workers conspired to make us a couple. After four years of blissful courtship, we were wed in a Russian Orthodox ceremony just outside of New York City. Elizaveta Yaroslavna Grubow, (some of you know her as Liz) and I were married in the Russian language. I have no idea what was said during that two-hour service. Perhaps it was then that I first promised before God to build her a dacha someday.

There is something undeniably romantic about a dacha. For many, that romance began as they watched the film *Dr. Zhivago*, and saw Lara and Yuri enter the abandoned "ice palace", the dacha of the Varykino estate.

Now for most of the men gathered in this clubhouse tonight, strolling anywhere with Julie Christie would be fantasy enough. But for some, including me, the dacha itself was the scene stealer.

Dr. Zhivago is Boris Pasternak's great love story. It takes place during the Russian revolution and civil war. The novel was censored in Soviet Russia but was published in Europe in 1957. To the great embarrassment of the Soviets, Pasternak won the Nobel prize for literature. It has been reported that the CIA helped influence the selection of Pasternak.

It was director David Lean's 1965 film classic of Pasternak's novel that delighted audiences worldwide, creating visually stunning sets and costumes. The film is considered among the most beautiful epics ever produced.

Following the success of *Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean saw the story of *Dr. Zhivago* as another opportunity to depict a large-scale historical drama.

It was Lean's preference to film on location, but the Soviets did not cooperate. Amazingly, the most Russian of stories was largely filmed in Spain. The winter dacha scene was filmed in summer in Madrid. Oscar winning set designer John Box and production designer Eddie Fowlie used tons of marble dust along with cellophane, wax, salicylic acid and soap flakes to create the magnificent dacha winter scene.

While viewers felt the chill of a Russian winter as they sat in the cinema, they would have been surprised to learn that while filming that scene, Omar Sharif and Julie Christie were, in fact, enduring the heat of an Iberian summer while wearing their exquisite Russian furs.

The film had enormous cultural impact. The costume designer, Phyllis Dalton, won an Oscar for her influential work. Fashion houses, notably Yves Saint Laurent, launched collections based on the film's costumes.

And "Lara's Theme", the name given to a leitmotif in the film, written by composer Maurice Jarre, became the basis for the song "Somewhere My Love" which reached number nine on the Billboard Hot 100. It won a Grammy for Best Performance by a Chorus. It was nominated for Song of the Year but lost to "Michelle" by John Lennon and Paul McCartney of the Beatles.

I return to tonight's intended topic now, the dacha and dachniki, (a colloquial term in Russian for dacha dwellers).

Dacha is that rare Russian term that has gained some currency in the Anglophone world. Beyond the Pasternak imagery, it may conjure up, for some, Chekhov stories, the indulgent out of town residences of the Soviet privileged classes or the vulgar post-Soviet monstrosities of Putin's corrupt cronies.

Dacha is usually described in English dictionary's as "country house" or "cottage", referred to as the Slavic equivalent of a second home or vacation home. This is not altogether wrong, nor is it sufficiently encompassing. A Russian dacha is a dwelling use intermittently, most often in warm weather or on weekends. It stands on its own plot of land and is generally within reach of a large urban city – most notably St. Petersburg or Moscow.

The city, in fact, provides the employment and source of income for dachniki. The dacha is a refuge and recreational amenity, away from the city, yet within a reasonable commuting range. Dachniki, therefore, are not rural folk but rather urban types, temporarily escaping the heat, the noise, the dirt and the chaos of the city.

In Russian history, the first dachas began to appear in the 18th century on land given as a gift by the tsar Peter the Great. In archaic Russian the word dacha means "something given". Private property as we know it was unknown at that time in Russia. The small estates were intended to

provide their owners, the dachniki, a respite from courtly life and its strict protocols, providing simple pleasures like planting a garden or taking tea in the fresh air. In the beginning, dachas were, therefore, retreats for those who already owned grand palaces.

An early example from this era was the seaside dacha at Peterhof, built in 1727 for the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna. It was a private place designed for her solitude, where no one could appear unannounced. It was a two-story stone house with a wooden wing.

The dacha idea caught on. By the mid 19th century, every Russian aristocrat wanted a dacha. Soon, the emergent industrial age merchant class joined in the race to build dachas. By the late imperial era, the non-aristocratic urban public was widely considered to have taken the lead in the dacha phenomenon, thereby confirming the waning powers of the aristocratic elite. Social change if not yet revolution was in the air.

One busy architect explained it this way in 1894, “who isn’t looking to go to a dacha these days. From the petty shopkeeper, salesman or member of a working cooperative, right up to the rich banker, office director and man of leisure inclusive – all of them, as soon as the first days of spring are upon us, dream of nothing but how to spend the summer outside of the dusty city, at the dacha, in the fresh air”.

The dacha boom of the late 19th century was linked to both economic and demographic factors, and in no small way, to the development of the railways. In St. Petersburg, Russia’s first horse drawn railway started operation in 1863. The first steam driven trams began service in 1880.

Russians needed to be near their workplaces to a much greater extent than their counterparts in London or Paris. Because of the limitations of the Russian urban transportation infrastructure, daily commuting to work from houses that would be built in leafy suburbs was for the most part unfeasible. City residents, therefore, were disposed to summer or weekend migration to their beloved dachas. Though intracity public transportation was underdeveloped, a network of railway lines did run from the city center to strings of dacha settlements around St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Russians were highly motivated to get away. Epidemics were rife, especially in summer. Saint Petersburg was both the least healthy and the most expensive capital city in Europe.

This new disposition was described well by Fedor Dostoyevsky who spent an idyllic summer in a dacha in Novgorod. He explained his thinking as follows, “it’s cheap, it’s quick and easy to move here and finally the house comes with furniture, even with crockery, and the station has newspapers and journals”.

In Dostoyevsky’s era the spread of dacha settlements continued to expand, and prices became more affordable as the railways extended. In the 1880s it was not unusual for Saint Petersburg

dachniki to venture into Finnish territory, as a string of settlements extended north along the Gulf of Finland.

As the geography extended, the dacha market became increasingly differentiated as well. Summer accommodations were desired by everyone from humble craftsman to aristocrats. Dachas varied enormously in size and cost.

The emerging differentiated requirements of the dachniki were addressed in a proliferation of articles, magazines and books on dacha design and construction that began to appear in the 1880s. The aesthetic presentation of the dacha became ever more important. Paul Shortt studied images from this golden era of dacha design, when he envisioned my dacha.

Arguably the most important journal of this golden era was a magazine published from 1873 to 1880 titled *The Motives of Russian Architecture*. The magazine, published in French and Russian, celebrated the followers of what was identified as “the Russian style” in architecture. The style, based on the traditions of folk culture revived handed down, old building methods and elements, resulting in dachas that looked like magical houses from a Russian folk tale.

These stylistic fantasies were made of wood, the most popular material in traditional Russian architecture. The wood was carved into whimsical shapes and often painted to add decorative elements to the building. Ornamental treatments of windows, doors and columns defined the architectural rhythm of the golden era of dachas in the late imperial period. You will see a number of etchings of dacha designs from this period framed in the entranceway of my dacha. They are a marvel to behold.

By the turn of the 20th century, before the revolution changed everything in 1917, dachas, for some, were more and more like grand estates, as depicted notably in Anton Chekhov’s *“The Cherry Orchard”*. In fact, following the success of his work *“The Seagull”*, Chekhov built a residence in Yalta which he named the White Dacha. A noted host, Chekhov entertained Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, among many others, at his dacha. Vladimir Putin visited the White Dacha, now a museum in 2003. Was it during that visit that he first conceived of his murderous campaign against Ukrainians? One can only imagine.

Postprandial promenades, family concerts and readings filled the evenings for the wealthy Dachniki of this era. Dachas were status symbols for Russia’s upper classes and served as inspirational settings for Russian artists, writers and composers. Some dachas came to serve as salons, with intellectuals gathering to discuss poetry, the arts or philosophy.

Then everything changed. The Bolsheviks stormed the winter palace. Thus began the 70-year period of communist rule in Russia. After the revolution, dachas were confiscated by the government. Soviet Russia celebrated the proletariat, requiring everyone to work. Sitting around sipping tea or strolling along a leafy path was branded as bourgeois. In the early Soviet era top officials, to no one surprise, were quietly granted the confiscated dachas. Stalin spent

most of his last year's in his dacha outside Moscow. In fact, he was at his dacha when Marshal Zhukov the commander of the First Belarussian Front informed him that Hitler had ended his life by suicide in his bunker in Berlin. Stalin is reported to have said, "So that's the end of the bastard. Too bad it wasn't possible to take him alive".

Cultural and scientific luminaries were given dachas as well. Boris Pasternak spent more than 20 years in his dacha near Moscow, allotted to him by the Soviet Writers Union, despite his ever more complicated relationship with the authorities. (In 1984, Pasternak's dacha was finally taken from the writer's surviving relatives and transferred to state ownership).

After World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as they would have it, the Soviet government more aggressively began to distribute tiny pieces of land (around 6000 sq. ft.) to the masses. The new dacha dwellers built small shabby houses on their tiny plots and used the remaining land for growing vegetables. In the aftermath of the war, dachas inevitably took on a more utilitarian function. Under Soviet rule, constant supply shortages ravaged the country. Ever adapting to the absurdity of the Soviets incompetent central planning, citizens thought that if they possessed land outside the city, they could be more self-sufficient, growing their own food. Some concluded that quietly living there year-round might be preferable to the life of shortages in the city.

Before long the authorities caught onto this movement and imposed regulations ensuring that people could not live on their dacha plots permanently. The state needed a strong labor force in the cities to rebuild the war-torn country.

By the 1980s, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the ongoing boom in dacha popularity, an estimated one in three urban families had access to a dacha. As in previous times, Dachniki would spend weekends, escaping the heat of summer, and tending to their vegetable gardens. These late Soviet era buildings remained primitive affairs without heat, running water or indoor toilets. Little thought was given to the aesthetic presentation of these poorly constructed dachas.

If you are curious about the lifestyle found in these ubiquitous Soviet era dachas, you might be pleased to know that one of them, south of Moscow, has today been turned into a public museum, frozen in time. The house is full of artifacts from the Soviet era. Visitors are served Russian tea in glass cups nested in old metal holders. They can make dumplings or borscht, or sample vegetables, fruits and herbs picked from the garden. One can only hope that the museum provides modern toilets for the visitors.

In the chaos of the 90s, when post-Soviet Russians were finally allowed to own property again, the newly minted oligarchs began building bigger and bigger dachas. They built garish concrete mansions with swimming pools and even mini zoos, that in no way referenced the traditional wooden dachas of the magical folk tale inspired Golden Era. Sadly, these vulgar buildings

remain the aesthetic standard today. It appears that no architectural revival of the late imperial dacha style is on the horizon in contemporary Russia.

In this historical overview, we have learned that dachas are a long-standing Russian institution, reflecting the values of each period, be it the Imperial era, Soviet times or whatever historians will one day call the kleptocratic Putin era.

Through it all, visiting a dacha remains a unique Russian activity, that stands alone as the most recognizable aspect of Russian summer culture. Shifts in governments, economic systems and social structures come and go, but it seems that Russian dachniki will forever find their way to their dacha when the grip of winter is released.

Return with me to that meadow in southern Indiana and let's pick up on that fateful conversation with Paul Shortt. The conversation I must confess now was not completely spontaneous. I had earlier shared my ambition to build something on my Indiana property with another friend Jack Rouse. I told him that I did not simply want to build a sensible timber home in the woods. Rather I wanted to build something of a folly. In architecture, a folly is defined as a whimsical or extravagant structure built to serve as a conversation piece or to commemorate a person or event. My ambition included both.

Jack was eminently qualified to give me a brilliant answer to my dreamy question. Jack spent his career designing dreams and delivering WOW moments. That's how his company, Jack Rouse Associates describes it on their website. His work is renowned. His clients include museums and theme parks worldwide.

Without hesitation Jack said, "Then don't hire an architect, they will be too practical and their visual vocabulary too narrow. If you want an impractical, slightly mad folly, then commission a set designer. They are in the business of creating fantasies. When the curtain rises, they are expected to astonish and delight."

He went on to advise me that once the fantasy is created by a set designer, then you will need to hire a licensed architect in order to ensure that the bloody thing doesn't fall down, not to mention that you will need to build something to code in order to receive a building permit.

He finished with one last, very specific bit of advice. He said, "have Paul Shortt design it".

It turns out that Jack and Paul go way back. Jack recruited Paul to teach theatre design and production at the College Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati.

Wow, that was a bit of unexpected counsel...a set designer to build my fantasy. When I got over my surprise, I quickly got comfortable with the idea. I knew Paul, of course, from the Literary Club. We both earned our living because of our visual acuity, so we had a lot to talk about when we gathered in the clubhouse on Mondays. I wasn't sure if Paul would be interested in creating

my fantasy. After all, he spends his winters watching the sunset over the Pacific from his home in Carmel. Would he be up for the project?

If you live in Cincinnati, you have probably been to a performance where you experienced Paul's remarkable work. In addition to his stunning work for the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music, Paul has done over 100 projects for the Cincinnati Opera, the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and the Cincinnati Ballet among others. My wife and I were fans of Paul's work long before we ever met him.

His commissions included projects across the US, Europe and beyond, including the New York City Opera, the Philadelphia Opera and the Opera Theater Music Festival in Lucca Italy. He has clearly put his master's degree from the Yale School of Drama to good use.

Beyond his work in the performing arts, Paul has done a number of significant architectural and landscape projects. Jack Rouse commissioned him to build a pavilion at the Sochi Olympics. I was privileged to visit a pavilion he designed at Ferrari Park in Abu Dhabi. He has done several projects in California including a recently completed outdoor performing venue in Big Sur. I was hoping to add Indiana to his résumé.

As we strolled along in the forest where I hoped to build my dacha, I told Paul that I wanted in part to commemorate the life of my mother-in-law Irena Churayev who had recently passed away. We will name the place "Dacha Irena" in order to honor a life in which she triumphed over seemingly impossible adversity. Many will recall a paper I read a few years ago about her amazing life, surviving the communist revolution, the siege of Leningrad and life in a German work camp.

Miraculously she managed to immigrate to the United States in 1948 where she soon met a young Ukrainian man, who also was also one of the 40 million displaced persons at the end of the war. Jaroslav Grubow had fought in the Red Army and was well aware of what Stalin had in store for a soldier that somehow got separated from his unit and ended up in Western Europe. Jaroslav made his way to Italy, ready to embark for Australia. In the chaos of the ongoing refugee crisis of postwar Europe, he somehow found himself on a ship heading to America instead. Soon Jaroslav and Irena were raising a family in Passaic New Jersey, a boy and a girl. That girl is now, of course, my wife Liz.

Paul agreed to the project and headed off to winter in California, sketchpad in hand. Spring returned to Cincinnati and Paul arrived excited to share his initial thinking with me. After extensive research on dacha design during the late imperial period, he created his vision. Remarkably, the building you will see next week is very much the vision that Paul captured in his initial drawing.

Paul recommended that he build a three-dimensional model so that I could more carefully study his design in the round. He returned to Carmel with his X-Acto knife, his glue gun and his cardboard to create a 3D prototype of my fantasy. Within a few months a box arrived via

Federal Express, and I found myself walking in the clearing of my forest, holding the model, trying to imagine it standing there someday.

As Jack Rouse had earlier counseled, my next step was to commission an architect. There wasn't any hesitation concerning who that architect would be. I've worked with Mark Gunther of Wichman Gunther Architects on quite a few projects. He has beautifully designed multiple office spaces for my company, LPK, for over 30 years. He has also done several projects at my home in Covington and sensitively updated my settlers log cabin in Indiana.

Paul and I met with Mark and soon I had a set of working drawings, in order to get my building permit and guide the builder.

Oh yes, the builder. This was going to be a unique challenge. Most sensible home builders would turn and run once they saw the working drawings. The complexity that Paul envisioned for my dacha was stunning. When you enter the great room of my dacha, for example, you look up 40 feet into a cupola. Building it would be a daunting challenge. And where would I source the wood? This timber home design called for live edge logs of a size not found in a lumberyard. Panic was starting to set in. The word "folly" was ringing in my ears.

I shared my intentions with a neighbor in Indiana that lived down the road, Bo Baker. If you called central casting and asked for an older country archetype, they would send you Bo. His potbelly is covered by bib overalls and his pick-up truck sports a bumper sticker that reads, "I love animals, I think they're delicious". Bo, in fact, is knowledgeable about quite a few things. A successful life in a rural setting requires a good dose of common sense and a range of skills. He had given me good advice over the years.

"Do you know anybody that could build this thing Bo," I asked? With the same confidence that I had earlier experienced with Jack Rouse, Bo said, "Steve Brown could do it. He has his own lumbermill, and he has built quite a few houses".

Lightning struck again. I was acquainted with Steve. I had never visited his mill. I asked Steve if he would be interested in building my dream house. He studied the plans. He stroked his chin several times. He finally said yes. Paul, Mark and I visited his operation, saw his beautiful house and several outbuildings that he had built on his property. We knew we had our guy.

And so, we began. For three years we had moments of success, challenge and unexpected delight. Remarkably the pandemic in no way affected our progress. Steve harvested all the wood locally, rock for my fireplace hearths came from my creek and my railings and other metal work was sourced from a nearby, forth-generation blacksmith. Global supply chains be damned!

Before I close, I must mention one more literarian, Harry the Potter or more formally Harry Santen. On a visit to my property last year, Harry noted the quality of the clay in the creek that runs below the dacha. He said "let me create something for you, with your clay". I shared with

him my ambition to host the literary club for our annual outing. I suggest that he create serving trays. Nico and his crew will be passing around hors d'oeuvres on Harry's creations so that all our fellow literarians can enjoy his artistry.

And so the fantasy is realized. With the coming of spring, Liz and I have begun our new life as dachniki. I took great pleasure in watching my bespoke dacha fantasy spring up like a mushroom in the forest.

The remaining question might be, how do I feel about it? I will dodge that question for now by simply stating that it is too soon to provide a thoughtful answer.

I will say this. I am approaching that question with some caution. I happened upon an essay by Joan Didion recently titled "A Trip to Xanadu" about what she called William Randolph Hearst's phantasmagoric castle on the hills above the Pacific Coast in San Obispo County.

She warns, "Make a place available to the eyes and in certain ways it is no longer available to the imagination".

