

# CROWDED HOUSE: a modern escape-pod

In our hyper-connected universe, solitude seekers are finding their answer in single-room, pre-fab backyard structures.

It has long been recognized that creativity flourishes in solitude. For Marco Morelli, a Longmont-based creative writer, the proverbial image of a cabin in the woods persisted as the ideal place to hone his craft. But what he had was an improvised office tucked in the spare bedroom of his 100 year-old farm-worker's cottage which was fine until his first child was born. The doting father found it nearly impossible to accomplish any gainful work, particularly once his office was annexed to the baby.

WORDS: SARAH GOLDBLATT - AIA • IMAGES: DAVID LAUER



LEFT: Morelli explains that his Studio Shed space is akin to poetry and requires him to be very intentional about where he puts things including his desk, books, and plants.

ABOVE: "Red has an intensity to it," says Morelli of his color choice for the siding. "It echoes the state of mind that I like to be in when I'm here".

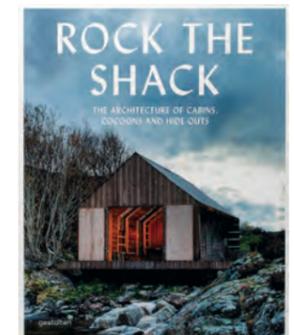
A U.S. Census Bureau survey reports a 4.2 million increase in home-based workers between 1997 and 2010

Morelli's effort to find workplace seclusion outside the home led to options that were either too costly or, in the case of a co-working space, too noisy and distracting. The self-proclaimed homebody wanted to be close to his family, dogs, and garden, yet still required contained escape from the domestic context of his life.

Seeking a Virginia Woolf-inspired room of his own, but not knowing where to start, Morelli turned to the internet: that instrument of hyper-connectivity that has simultaneously enabled an ever-increasing number of people to work from home (a U.S. Census Bureau survey reports a 4.2 million increase in home-based workers between 1997 and 2010) and engendered feelings of social and personal isolation. "While we are close in proximity, we are anonymous to our neighbors, passing one another in our physical and virtual hallways without ever truly connecting," says Sofia Borges, co-author/editor of *Rock the Shack*. The new book, published by Gestalten, explores

the rediscovery of small spaces that "speaks to a need of being truly alone in order to come together."

Morelli envisioned such a place—along the lines of author Michael Pollan's diminutive writer's refuge in New England—to focus his thoughts. In *A Place of My Own*, Pollan details his inquiry into architecture and its relationship to nature through the design and construction of an intentional space "to read and write and daydream." But unlike Pollan, Morelli didn't have the luxury of time or money to consider a site-built option or explore the feng-shui or flow of "chi" in his backyard. Feeling a sense of urgency, Morelli searched the web for pre-fabricated options. Just as a recent L.A. Times article reported, there are a growing number of companies offering "instant offices" that provide quick backyard delivery and set up, like the G-Pod, KitHaus, or Tetra-Shed. However the consumer often pays a premium for these high-tech solutions. Seeking a more affordable option, Morelli stumbled upon Studio Shed—a home-



Rock the Shack explores beautifully designed outposts for those seeking shelter from the digital deluge or just wishing to recreate the childhood magic found in the backyard fort or tree house.

grown solution that fit him to a T.

Back in 2006, Boulder-based Olympic mountain biker, Jeremy Horgan-Kobelski, built a backyard shed to store his family's collection of bikes. His friend (and business partner) Mike Koenig, also a bike racer, appreciated the shed's crisp, mid-century modern aesthetic and light-filled interior and asked if he could duplicate it for himself. And thus, Studio Shed was born.

Horgan-Kobelski explains that what started out as a small line of utilitarian storage sheds has involved into a "great modular system that can accommodate a lot of customization." The company has developed a convertible set of parts, similar in concept to the post-war Case Study housing platform of easy duplication and affordability, allowing space-seekers to configure their own structure online to suit their needs and aesthetic preferences. Once an owner has approved the drawings for their shed-and site constraints have been addressed-including building and zoning code requirements, siting and soil

conditions, the selected design moves into fabrication in Studio Shed's on-site factory. "I like to say it's custom, but not custom," says Jason Plumb, VP of Product Development. "Our customers have the ability to tailor a product to their needs from a set number of parts and pieces-like Legos," he adds. All in short order.

According to Plumb, the typical Studio Shed project takes 4-6 weeks from inception to assembly. Following thirty hours of shop fabrication time, a complex choreography of flat-packing the wall panels for shipping takes place. Items like windows, roofing and siding are nested within the wall panels to "minimize the shipping envelope and maximize the protection of individual parts" while in transit. Further, each panel is configured to be "handled comfortably by two people, but also large enough to go up quickly." With an experienced crew, on-site assembly takes 2-3 days (5-6 days for larger units). And while the company continues to refine the process to be more pre-fab than design-build, they don't want to diminish what makes their



ABOVE: Jeremy Horgan-Kobelski, Studio Shed co-founder and Olympic mountain biker, built the first shed in his backyard to solve his own problem of where to store his bikes.

RIGHT: The cyclist's shed includes bike repair space and also fits neatly into his backyard landscape.



Images this page: Courtesy of Studio Shed

## GET A SHED.

WANT A SHED OF YOUR OWN? JEREMY HORGAN-KOBELSKI, OWNER OF LOUISVILLE BASED STUDIO SHED SHARES A FEW TIPS WHEN CONSIDERING A NEW SHED.

### SHED PLACEMENT

Where do I put it? It's important to pick a spot that will create positive outdoor living space, as a shed can really become an important and intentional piece of one's landscape design. It's also important to know where your setbacks are, and if there are easements on your property that you can't build in.

### DO I NEED A PERMIT?

Most counties in the US allow for the construction of a 120 sqft space without a building permit, which is convenient, and one reason that our 8x10 and 10x12 models are the most popular. This varies though, some places allow up to 200 sqft and some as little as 80 sqft. If you do need a permit though, it's generally pretty simple with these small spaces - still much less hassle than a full remodel or addition.

### HOW MUCH SPACE DO I NEED?

Bigger isn't always better. Some of my favorite sheds have been small offices or art studios. It's a matter of balancing your budget, the space you've got available and what you intend to use it for.

### WINDOW AND DOOR PLACEMENT

Depending on what you're using it for, you'll want different options. More light? Less light? Does my door placement work with the existing traffic path in my yard?

### CERTIFIED INSTALLATION OR DIY?

Most clients choose professional installation. However, we offer most Studio Sheds as DIY kits as well, and numerous clients have had great success and a lot of fun building them with friends over a weekend or two. It's a great option for the handy homeowner, you just need to know whether you are the type to do it yourself or if you want to leave for work and come home to a new space in your backyard.

Learn more about Studio Shed at: [studio-shed.com](http://studio-shed.com)



Images this page: Courtesy of Studio Shed



Studio Shed uses run the gamut from art and music studios to home offices and meditation retreats. The 14 x 26 shed (shown above) is a sun-drenched jewelry studio that also incorporates storage space for family gear.

**"What I hear from a lot of people, is that their home is no longer a sanctuary. The appeal of a Studio Shed is that it provides a calm environment and goes up in a matter of days versus building a costly addition to your home."** Jason Plumb - Studio Shed

brand unique—engaging their customers. "Our clientele want to be part of the creative process," explains Plumb. "They are progressive thinkers who want well-designed space, detached from their home, in which to immerse themselves in their pursuits." While nearly half of Studio Shed's orders are for unfinished units, used mainly for storage, the other half accommodates a range of home offices and art studios for a variety of creative endeavors including photography, painting, jewelry-making, and music. The company also gets requests for the occasional man-cave, teen hangout, backyard gym, or playhouse. "What I hear from a lot of people," says Plumb, "is that their home is no longer a sanctuary. The appeal of a Studio Shed is that it provides a calm environment and goes up in a matter of days versus building a costly addition to your home." With research forecasting a substantial increase in America's freelance workforce by 2020, the demand for home

offices and studios that differentiate between domestic and work life will continue to grow.

For Morelli, once he hit "send" to order his 10' x 14' shed, he waited, like an expectant father, for his Studio Shed to arrive. With the help of neighbors, he prepared the foundation and poured the concrete, while pumpkin vines expanded around the empty slab. About a month later, on a hot August day, his backyard retreat arrived on the back of a flatbed truck, neatly wrapped and stacked. As the walls went up in the course of the next 48 hours, Morelli describes feeling a sense of joy and gratitude to see it there for real. And that's no small deal. As he explains, "This was not just a nice place to work. It was an incubator for my vision of what I want to contribute to this world."

Morelli's 140-square foot Studio Shed has served as his de facto cabin in the woods

ever since he installed it. "It's better than I ever imagined," he says, acknowledging the solitude of the space and the convenience of his 20-second commute. "I have done more and better writing in the last two years than in the previous tens," he adds. "The space is like poetry for me, spatial poetry—almost like haiku. The compactness of the space forces you to be very intentional about where you put things and for me, it provides the necessary serenity to shift into the mindset of a writer and artist."

# DESIGN FOR HALLOWED GROUND

CU BOULDER ARCHITECTURE

STUDENTS CRAFT A GRAVE MARKER  
STORAGE STRUCTURE FOR COLUMBIA  
CEMETERY THAT INSPIRES AWE ON A  
MODEST SCALE

words: Sarah Goldblatt - AIA  
images: Marcus Farr & Michael deLeón

Columbia Cemetery, located along Ninth and Pleasant in Boulder's University Hill neighborhood, is a veritable catalog of the city's founders and pioneers. Familiar names like Macky and Rippon are among numerous others interred here for whom the city's streets, parks, and university buildings are named. Yet age, weather, and vandalism have left an off-site warehouse full of broken grave marker fragments belonging to this historic burial ground. For Mary Reilly-McNellan, the cemetery's Preservation Project Manager, the situation was troubling as she worried that these cultural artifacts, overtime, might be lost or forgotten. She envisioned a place, within the cemetery, where families, friends and historians could easily access the stones, and where a dedicated conservation corps could provide hands-on restoration.

In 2011, with a small reserve from Boulder Parks and Recreation (\$15,000), the forward-thinking Reilly-McNellan reached out to the University of Colorado's Environmental Design Program (ENVD) to tap the creativity of the undergraduate architecture studies students for the design and construction of a building to house the stones, tools, and workspace.





### LIFE LESSONS

Under the direction of architect and senior instructor, Marcel de Lange, twelve CU Boulder Environmental Design students experienced the practical side of the profession when they signed up to design and build a grave marker storage structure for Boulder’s Columbia Cemetery. The students gravitated toward a contemporary design solution with historical references.

Intrigued by a building site layered with cultural and symbolic meaning, Marcel de Lange, principal of architecture firm 641 West and ENVD senior instructor, seized the opportunity to guide a select group of design students through the exploration of how a utilitarian structure, made from affordable materials, could fit comfortably into the larger context of life and death, mourning and decay.

By utilizing high-tech digital tools, prefabrication strategies and sourcing local materials, the students completed the project all within a twelve week summer session. Yet, the process was not without obstacles. The building had to be sited so as not to disturb any human remains within the adjacent Potter’s Field—home to at least 500 unmarked graves. Additionally, the cemetery’s Landmark status dictated that the new structure should not diminish the understanding of the historic site. “The real challenge,” explains Reilly-McNellan, “was not to confuse the course of history with an incompatible building.”

Guided by these constraints and aspiring to elevate the typical shed aesthetic, the group selected a building site at the terminus of an abandoned road towards the back of the cemetery. The road’s narrow width established the structure’s rectangular shape, while the building’s cross-section evolved from the students’ exploration of fundamental principles of architecture such as hierarchy, symmetry, and structural clarity. Under de Lange’s guidance (and multiple reviews by the Boulder Landmarks Board) they arrived at a compact footprint (440 sq. ft.) and a classic gabled form that seemed befitting its location and use. Participant Caleb White explains that the shape straddles both “the more ceremonial and respectful tone of the cemetery and the more familiar shape we associate with home.” But that is where the reference to the language of domestic architecture ends.

The design team wrapped not only the roof with naturally rusting Cor-Ten steel, but also the entire north and south walls—imparting the building with a monolithic quality—“like an obelisk or memorial,” describes team member Erin Masket. In a further effort to use workaday materials evocatively, the students turned the corrugated Cor-ten panels sideways to symbolically link the building to the site’s rural beginnings. In contrast, the gabled end walls are clad with white polycarbonate plastic panels to provide diffused natural light

### LUMINOUS

**TOP:** To pay tribute to the reliable generator that provided power to the construction site, the team placed floodlights within the building to produce a one-time luminous glow.

**MIDDLE:** Naturally rusting, corrugated cor-ten steel panels reference the region’s mining roots and hint at the decomposition occurring within the cemetery grounds.

**BOTTOM:** The building site, along a narrow abandoned road, predetermined the structure’s slim profile while the classic gabled roof form was selected for its dual reference to the iconography of domestic and sacred architecture.



#### ARCHITECTONICS

**TOP:** Structural engineer, Chris O'Hara of Studio NYL advised the team on the forces and assembly of the building. Students designed and modeled each connection in 3-D software and were responsible for cutting the wood members, welding the steel, and assembling the components.

**BELOW:** To elevate the role of the shed and its contents, the students carefully balanced the proportions of the structure and considered the textural and sensory property of each building material to create a unified whole. Recycled materials were used wherever possible, including crushed concrete surfacing, logs salvaged from the Fourmile Canyon fire and beetle-kill pine.



into the storage and work areas (the building has no electricity). The material choice further serves to emphasize the structure's silhouette which merges simultaneously with the sky and earth—suggesting a place of reflection and repose.

Given that cemeteries were among the first formal outdoor gathering places, the students felt inclined to include a public component to the building. They achieved just that by splitting the programmatic elements into "tool storage" and "grave stone storage" and bisecting the enclosed spaces with an open breezeway. From the aperture, visitors have unobstructed views to the surrounding landscape— dotted with listing markers that seem to mimic the Flatirons in the distance.

With an eye to sustainable materials, the breezeway is clad in beetle-kill pine panels. A low retaining wall utilizes salvaged logs from the recent Fourmile fire and crushed recycled concrete heightens the sensory contrast between adjacent ground surfaces. A post and beam structural system, with plate steel connections and steel tie-rods, elevates the straightforward assembly to a poetic level.

What started as a plan for an on-site marker storage and volunteer work space, and a desire to teach about architecture through hands-on building, ended up as a deftly crafted example of contemporary architecture—derived from the essence of its place and time.

#### VIEW CORRIDOR

**RIGHT:** Delicate rings cut from round tube steel sections and thin steel rods comprise a part of the building's three-point arch. All components were pre-fabricated and assembled on site to speed construction time.

**BELOW:** A breezeway, envisioned as a spot for contemplation and interaction, separates the larger grave marker storage space from a smaller tool shed. A timeline etched in acrylic and attached to the wall provides visitors with a quick glimpse of the cemetery's rich history.

**NOTE:** The project received an award of excellence for new construction in a historic context from the Boulder Landmarks Board.

## THE TEAM

### STUDENTS

Scott Abernethy, Ian Carr, Nile Greenberg, Erin Masket, Andrew Mayer, Alex Mulhern, Taylor Odell, Preston Penny, Abe Rifkin, Jessica vanWey, Caleb White, Derek Woods

### SENIOR INSTRUCTOR

Marcel de Lange, 641 West Design principal

### ASSISTANT

Mike Blea

### ENGINEERING

Studio NYL

