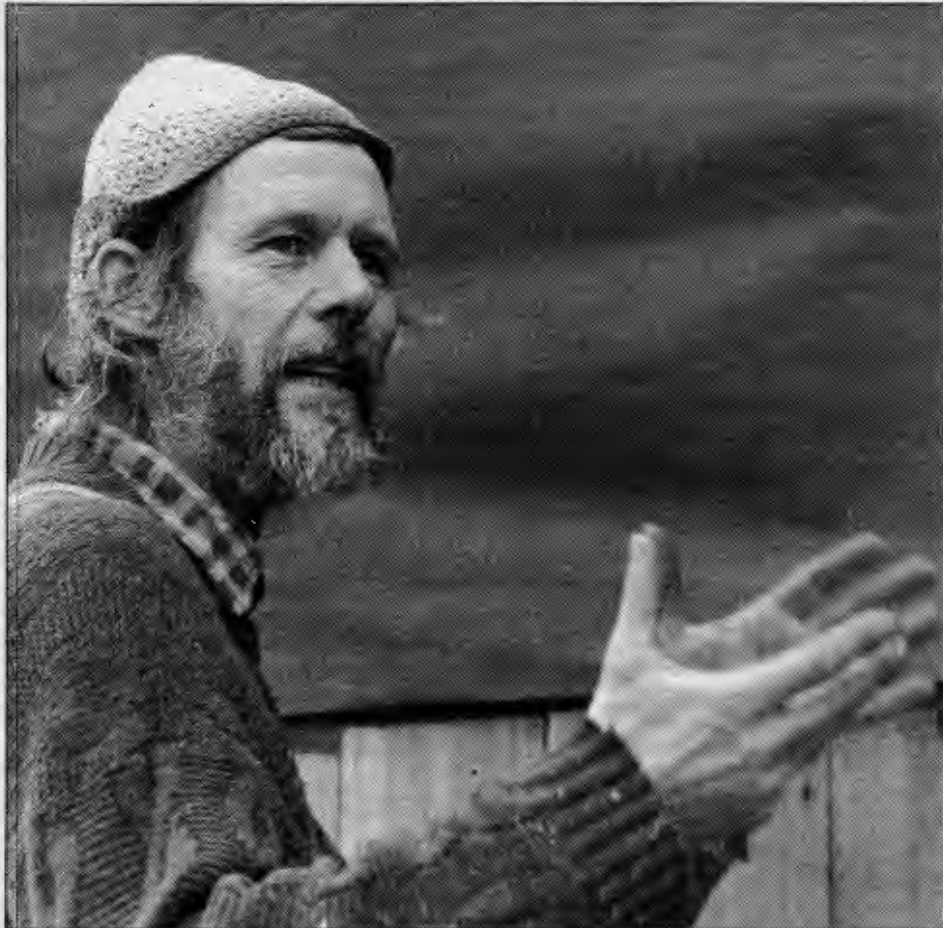


Holm: Artist first, builder next



Ann Katzenbach

It didn't take long for Niels Holm to know he would never be satisfied as a carpenter. The Denmark native passionately believes that homes should be lived-in pieces of art.

By Ann Katzenbach

Niels Holm is an opinionated man. He honors the spirit of the individual and is generally opposed to rules and regulations.

He calls himself first an artist, second a builder, and always a self-styled anarchist. He dreams of a community in which houses sit snugly together fronting on tree-lined, human-sized streets. Behind and among the houses are intimate courtyards that keep out the wind and let in the sun.

In Holm's residential utopia, the houses reflect the creativity of the house-dwellers. Each is a joyful work of art pieced together without rules, except perhaps a suggestion that people use recycled material and lots of color. In his world, there are no licensed architects, no codes, no official materials, and no room for builders whose aim is to make "something flat and plumb and square," Holm said. Given freedom to create, Holm is confident people would create much more livable and affordable habitats.

In an attempt to help make this philosophy a possibility, Holm has what he calls a "school" for those who want to build their own homes but lack the skills or the confidence to proceed alone. André Le Rest and his

wife built their home under Holm's supervision and are happy with the results. Le Rest says that Holm helped them get bank financing and came for two hours each day for the first couple of months of construction. Then, Le Rest worked on his own until he ran into a problem or had a question. At which point he would ask for help.

"I learned a lot about building, carpentry and design," says La Rest. He thinks that anyone with some construction experience and courage could do the same.

Holm, who is Danish by birth and retains some of the flavor of his native tongue, says, "It's a way to have fun to build something. Instead of being a big burden, it can be fun. It's not about money. The only way I think to have fun making money is to play poker. But to make money building? I'd rather just have fun building." For him, working with people is part of the fun. Working for people is not so much fun.

Recycled haven

In his own home, the fun of building is evident. The hundreds of creative ways Holm has found to recycle

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Holm: Building for the fun of it

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materials and to create warm, thoughtful, energized space would be worth cataloging. There is no surface inside or outside the structure that hasn't been embellished with something handmade and unique. The house is mainly stucco and wood. One reaches its entrance on the second floor by way of a fanciful staircase reminiscent of the work of Antonio Gaudi, the famed Spanish architect whose free-form cement buildings of the early 1920s are artistic landmarks in Barcelona today.

Inside, every door and many small ceiling areas are handmade with small geometric pieces of recycled wood. The doors are one of Holm's trademarks. Some use color, others use texture. For variety, some incorporate mirror glass and bottle caps. Each could be likened to a patchwork quilt.

Holm loves to work with pieces of wood. He starts with a basic pattern, but the colors and textures that he places in each space are chosen spontaneously so he's always a little surprised with the result.

While the wooden doors are geometric and balanced, Holm's tile work is random. His bathrooms can provide inspiration for anyone who would like a tile shower minus the usual repetitive, pasty color. Without any plan, Holm simply cemented together a collage of bits and pieces of tile. Whole squares and broken shards combine with grout to turn a shower into a fountain of jazz. "I wasn't too sure what I was doing," Holm admits. "But, what the hell, you have to start."

For most mortals this is a daring undertaking. You have to follow your creative instincts. However, what you get, as Holm points out, is a one-of-a-kind creation without the worry of keeping every tile in just the right place. How liberating to know that this technique cannot be judged by straight lines.

Irritating walls

Contemporary walls irritate Holm more than any other aspect of design and construction. He looks to the past and says, "When you look at old brick,



A Niels Holm wall or door can be made of almost anything: mirrors, bottle caps, tile.

they always made it in and out. They made a sculpture. This idea of flat walls, it's really horrible. Especially in living rooms. These flat off-white walls — no color."

In his own house, the walls are textured using different techniques that Holm devised for dry wall compound. No surfaces are really flat and many of the walls and ceilings have soft curves.

Most remarkable is the color. Holm has blended endless shades of paint on his walls and achieved a muted, ever-changing surface that compels

the eye. There is depth and shadow and light and shimmer emanating from the paint. When asked the secrets of his technique, Holm shrugs. "I don't buy much paint," he says. "I just use whatever is left over and put it on all kinds of ways."

Seeing the results of Holm's experiments in wall and door decoration has inspired some people to push the narrow limits of their personal vision and try something a little out of the ordinary at home. When he can inspire people to take risks, Holm feels he has accomplished something powerful.

Other cultures

Holm has traveled widely, experiencing other cultures and studying their architecture and art.

"I always like houses and towns in the old places. I have a longing for an old, intimate feeling," he muses.

America, he thinks, misses this feeling except in some places in the Southwest. He loves the natural building material of adobe — its rounded organic form and the way it lends itself to color. The scarcity of folk art in this country, he thinks, comes as a

— Continued on Next Page



Ann Klotz/Hubch

Making doors from small scraps of wood is one of Niels Holm's favorite works of art.

Holm: Exploration

— Continued from Previous Page
result of the standards set by machines.

Everything is stamped out of the same mold, including codes that encourage the use of standardized materials. "It's like canned music," says Holm. "It can really make you brain-dead." He thinks we should borrow more from other cultures; allow ourselves more freedom of expression.

Holm admits that he sometimes goes overboard when trying to stay outside the sterile system that

America has created for its builder class.

"I'm becoming an ornery old guy," he confesses. His outspoken, radical posture upsets some people, who usually fail to recognize the playfulness and creative energy that is at the heart of his philosophy.

To build a home or put on an addition or design an outbuilding with this man as your guide would change forever the way you think of art and shelter and design.

It would also be a lot of fun.

Because of Niels

9-27-07

Because I know Niels, I'm going to be more whimsical. I'm going to build with curves + arches + broken tiles + black glass. I'm going to pick flowers + put them on friend's heads.

Because I know Niels, I'm not going to care if my renter's check is a little late. I'll ask her, as Niels asked me, is everything OK? Do you want to make a trade for rent?

Because I know Niels, I'm going to encourage KaiSea to follow her own path into adulthood, just like he did with Silas.

Because I know Niels, I'm going to laugh out-loud. I'm going to speak up until I know I'm heard. I'm going to walk tall, look around + take notice. I'm going to catch people's eye + wink!

Because I know Niels, I'm going to go to Prefair. I'm going to put up the Sauna + work in it + take it down. I'm going to be happy, have fun + tell Niels' jokes.

Because I know Niels, I'm going to be a Hospice Volunteer. I'm going to hope that the hospice patients like me half as much as they loved Niels.

Because I'm one of the people who has been profoundly influenced by Niels, I'm going to return to my spiritual practice + try to be as gracious as he. I'm going to work on being a better person + hopefully get a little twinkle in my eye, just like his.

A Celebration of the Life of Niels T. Holm

A Celebration of Life for Niels T. Holm is to be held at the Palindrome in Port Townsend at 2 p.m. on Saturday, 10/10. It is a potluck, and there will be a program of reminiscence and music following. Carpooling is encouraged as parking is limited, and there is disabled access to the far left near the kitchen entrance.

Niels Thorkild Holm, born in Nazi occupied, Viborg, Denmark Sept. 29, 1941 died Sept. 27 at home after a short and intense experience with colon cancer. His parents were both born in 1899 and the family still discussed their sentiment of the taking of their farmlands earlier by Germany in Schleswig-Holstein. He was deeply influenced by the Nazi period, and he spent many hours watching movies about that time and there were many discussions about the nature of good and evil over his lifetime.

Niels lived in Port Townsend for 30 years and considered it his "country." With his loud voice (hard of hearing from so many years of electric saws) friendliness and exuberance, he quickly became a visible and large presence here. That is a reason for this rather lengthy obituary. For some, "he has always been here," and his loss will be deeply felt.

Even as a child Niels had a love of beauty, religion, nature and art. He studied birds from the time he was 5 and in his early teens began traveling around Europe to art museums which he and O'Neill later visited a few years ago on a 6-month trip through Europe, adding, at that time, visits to churches in six countries.

Niels cultivated a unique religious and artistic worldview and loved to philosophize with others. He was an avid reader from an early age of classic novels, and books about art, philosophy and religion. He had a European sensibility out finely written literature, both old and modern. As a teen he added mythology, and psychology. He read among others, Jung, Joseph Campbell and Kierkegaard extensively and in the 1950s, he became interested in Buddhism through Alan Watts.

After coming to the U.S. in 1967 he was a monk at Tassajara and San Francisco Zen Center until 1972 when his teacher, Suzuki Roshi, whom he served as attendant, died of cancer.

At 19, after leaving architecture school and before coming to the U.S. at 25, he began a walking journey without money from Denmark to Ceylon, almost freezing to death in the mountains of the Himalayas and almost scared to death by all the people with guns in the Swat Valley of Pakistan. He walked the length of India, getting lost in a jungle for five days at one point. The stories of those times could fill a book and we had great pleasure in hearing of his many adventures told with enthusiasm by Niels in his thick Danish accent over the years. In Pakistan he bummed what he thought was an ordinary cigarette. It was hash, and he thought he was having a "religious experience" before he realized what had happened. He never liked drugs as he already had naturally heightened sensibilities to his surroundings, especially to color. (He did like his daily beer.)

Niels traveled the coasts of Africa and South America as a merchant marine and he fished in the North Sea, spending some time on the Faroe Islands working. It was money that awaited him here that he used to buy his ticket to America, where he arrived without any money. His father had retained American citizenship, having lived here from 1924 to 1935 and working as a U.S. Superintendent of Highways, which made it easy for Niels to become a citizen, although he had been born in Denmark. He was the youngest of five children, the oldest three born in the U.S. In his 20s, Niels served two years in a camp for conscientious objectors and was fortunate to meet friends there he has had for life. He worked in a museum and was surrounded by writers, composers and many other interesting Danes who refused to do military service. He registered immediately in the U.S. as a C.O. He also worked awhile in Greece and Spain. Once with all the women in a cigar factory where he became their mascot. He was a very cute kid!

While at Tassajara he met and married Kress Heir, Maggie Kress, when Suzuki Roshi insisted they do so "to avoid scandal!" After four years they split and Niels moved to Colorado and was at work with Choyam Trumpa a short while. He bought his one and only suit in his life at Trumpa's insistence that everyone have one and he was there for the famous time when Trumpa rode a white horse in an English military uniform as a practice of "crazy wisdom" to shake people from their identities, which for the most part, was "hippie" at the time. Niels was not a hippie and did not like it when people categorized him as such.

He built two houses in Colorado and decided Trumpa's way was not his, decided to go to Maine and join a Zen Center farm. He stayed one and a half years there before coming to Port Townsend to restore a boat in three months and sail to Alaska alone with no motor. He landed near Sitka, to be a hermit for awhile in an abandoned cannery in which he constructed an apartment. When winter winds started throwing metal about he feared decapitation, so called a plane from a passing fishing boat and came back to Port Townsend.

He was about 36 when he arrived in Port Townsend and he began establishing himself as a landlord, buying what was called "The Zendo" on Van Ness St. and later the old Co-op corner, with his brother, Page, and still later, a house on Cherry Street. He sold the Co-op to Malcolm Dorn about five years ago. Countless numbers of people became Niels' friends while living in one of his houses or renting one of the business sites.

He built himself a house, primarily from recycled materials, on four lots near Fort Worden and later another home for his former spouse, Sally, on the adjoining four lots so they could co-parent their son, Silas, after their marriage of 13 years dissolved. He also worked as a contractor and was partners with Terry Chambers, then later Malcolm Dorn, and was a founder of Blue Iron Construction. He began as a "regular" builder and became bored with the repetition, so began making "soulful" and "artistic" structures as well as specializing in winding staircases, wood siding and for the outside, cement. As owner of Sitting Frog Wood Quilts he made beautiful ceilings and doors. Many, many, P.T. homes have Niels' artistic signature.

Niels was also a painter and gave away hundreds over the years. He often thought of becoming a portrait painter for a career, but decided that any "career" as an artist would go against his artistic philosophy of doing "outsider art." He did theater backdrops and many an interesting wall. In the last eight years he and O'Neill collaborated on a number of projects, one a huge floor plan of the "Buddha Hall" in his home and a huge three-part porch ceiling installed on a really fun trip to Eugene at George Bradock's Construction offices.

Niels was a Boiler Room board member, as well as Quimper Credit Union. He donated labor to many, many, projects, among them the stairs of the Quimper Unitarian Church and Mary Quillen's roof. He grew an acre of squash for a little side-business and had a tofu business with Tinker Cavallero.

For a time, Niels was an avid poker player and was part of a "fun" group of guys that met infrequently, (usually at Bruce Cannavaro's) and sometimes more frequently he would go to P.T.'s local venue.

His favorite projects were some amazing cement structures at the Oregon Country Fair. He was able to work without thought to codes and worked fast and furiously to create what made him a bit of a "star" featured in the Eugene news. Over the years he and O'Neill returned there, she cooking for the crew of the sauna and he doing more artful building. They formed some lasting friendships there. The last time they discovered they were the oldest folks on the crew and their energy was slipping, but were welcomed back with love and acceptance.

In the 1980s he and his family traveled to Denmark, Mexico and Guatemala. In the 1990s Niels traveled alone to Haiti and went with his son, Silas, to Cuba to walk around and listen to music every year ago. Silas is an accomplished guitarist. He also plays the piano. Recently he started art school on extensive scholarships in Portland, however, has taken leave due to his father's illness and then, impending, death.

Niels' niece, Eva Holm, and her husband, Johnathan Boughton, moved to Port Townsend after visiting Niels and subsequently adopted his beloved grandnephews, Mohabo and Deribe, from Ethiopia. Over the years Danish family visited and recently, Louie Jensen came to help O'Neill and Niels during his last week.

Although they had known each other for eight years, when O'Neill Louchard hired him to make a 200 square foot ceiling for her home, they were pleasantly surprised to find that they had a great deal more in common than just their artistic sensibilities. Niels was going through what he termed, "Going from 16 to 60" and wanted someone with whom to do "honesty practice," which was based on a book O'Neill inherited from Michael Liss when he died. This practice led soulmates to incorporate romance and to marriage, Danish style (no ownership papers). Over the next years they studied together, talked, watched hundreds of films, trying each year to best the number of the last at the Port Townsend Film Festival, took bird-watching walks, traveled, and danced. They improvised a mix of tango and swing, coined "swango." Travels took them two months to Europe and two months to Japan, where O'Neill's son and his family live, and on many other road trips around the western U.S. to visit friends and family. On a trip to see O'Neill's grandchildren at South Lake Tahoe, he overheard one of the teens say on the phone, "My grandma here and so is Grandma's boyfriend." He delighted in the idea that he was a "Grandma's boyfriend."

As he transitioned from "boyhood," skipping middle-age, and entering the Autumn and what turned out to be, his Winter years, Niels decided that his religious life was what took precedence. An epiphany he had when son, Silas, was about 14 remained part of his emphasis. After hearing Monty Roberts on the radio, a horse whisperer, he read his book and realized that he had been naming Silas. He vowed to stop, and although, he did not completely, he had thus given permission to be called on it. O'Neill and Niels studied Non-Violent Communication at workshops with Marshall Rosenberg and local folks for over four years and took vows to communicate without blaming or shaming, in addition to practicing being transparent to one another by not lying. This is the basis, added to Buddhism (kindness and being present), of his religious philosophy.

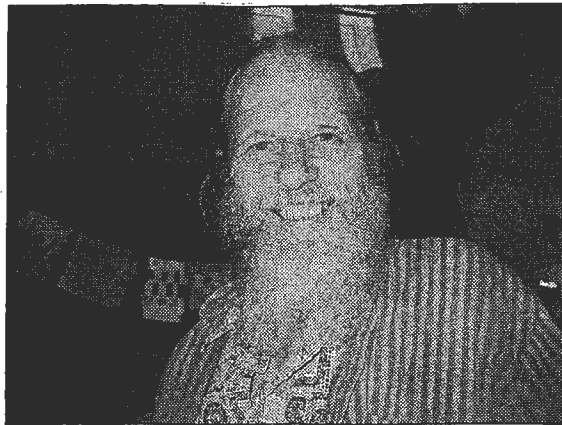
Niels enjoyed being in a number of plays, both at the Oracle theatre and at the Wooden Boat Festival where he always played a pirate with gusto. He grew his last beard for the part and was very disappointed he could not be in this year's production due to his illness. We hear Joey Pipia stepped into his role, and his Danish accent.

His major teachers in the last years were Eckhart Tolle, Ken McCleod, Papaji, Gangaji, Byron Katie, Sri Nisgardatta Maharaj, and Adyashanti, who he felt was pure Zen for Americans, without any cultural trappings. Niels taught a meditation course at Peninsula College about five years ago and was a practitioner of meditation for over 40 years. He became a member of a local sangha where he stopped holding open Zen meditation at his home for many years. Every Saturday for years he hosted a meeting he called BuVu, which consisted of talking about the reality of our lives, speaking truthfully, and becoming transparent to ourselves and others, as well as doing creative arts. The Jungian idea of developing our feminine and masculine sides and coming into balance was also emphasized.

Through these practices Niels became very happy, peaceful and had a deep sense of love and compassion within him that became more and more visible and palpable in the last two years. He wanted to spend his last years helping others find the peace he had and dancing and traveling with O'Neill. He was quite shocked that after a life-time of perfect health and a nary a pill that had cancer, found in a routine exam after going on medicare.

Niels and O'Neill spent some hectic months trying to save his life, but it was not to be. Quite quickly, he took his illness in stride and was able to come to acceptance of the inevitable that came evident. He met with and talked on the phone with many friends from long ago and nearby to make his peace. O'Neill enlisted Jefferson Health Care Hospice, where he had been a volunteer for almost four years, to help the last week of his life, and they were able to provide pain control. Three weeks before he died he walked over to see his last Hospice patient.

Donations may be made to your favorite charity or to JHC Hospice at 834 Sheridan or to The Boiler Room.



The Lead
10/10

Niels T. Holm

Niels Thorkild Holm died of cancer on Sept. 27, 2007, at home in Port Townsend, Wash., with his sweetheart by his side. He was 65.

Born Sept. 29, 1941, to Aage Harald Sommer and Ingeborg Elise (Mortensen) Holm in Nazi-occupied Viborg, Denmark, he attended school in Denmark and traveled in more than 50 countries before eventually settling in Port Townsend at age 36.

At age 30 he wed Maggie Kress of New York City at Tassajara Monastery in California; they were married 1971-1974. At 40 he wed Sally Hall in Port Townsend; they were married from 1982 to 1995. At 58, he married O'Neill Dianne Louchard, also of Port Townsend.

Niels was a man of quick wit and great humor, a ready laugh and a big smile. He was full of creativity and loved to converse, dance, travel and birdwatch, and he was an avid movie fan.

He was a hospice volunteer for almost four years and attended Quimper Unitarian Universalist Church and a local meditation group. He also hosted regular meditation for many years at all of his Port Townsend residences. Religion was of central importance in his life.

Surviving are his son Silas Robert Holm of Portland and Port



Niels Holm

Townsend; stepson Garth Irons (Yukiko) of Miyazaki, Japan; three grandchildren; and soul son and daughters Markus Koch, Marni Negley,

Alex Anagnostopoulous, Krystal Jackson and Dava Hester, all of Port Townsend. He is also survived by brothers Aage Raymond Holm (Kaya) of Walnut Creek, Calif., and Jørgen Peder Holm of Esberg, Denmark; sister Karen Kadison (Dick) of Philadelphia, Pa.; and nieces and nephews and extended family in the United States, Denmark and Norway.

He was preceded in death by his sister Edith Sommer Holm and her husband, Karl.

A celebration of Niels life is conducted at 2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 13 at the Palindrome, with a potluck, reminiscences, music and dance. Officiating at the service are the Rev. Bruce Bode and Adriane and Jim Oliver. Carpooling is encouraged to the disability-accessible facility.

Memorial contributions are suggested in Niels' name to Jefferson Healthcare Hospice, 834 Sheridan, or to the Boiler Room, 711 Water St., both in Port Townsend, WA 98368.