

GARDEN DESIGN

Autumn 2014

THE MOST **BEAUTIFUL** SEASON

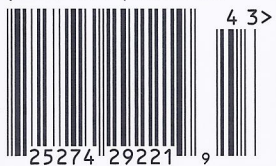
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Dan Snow's *Walking Wall*, also known as the "Contemplation Wall" by his clients, extends across 200 feet of a property in Newfane, Vermont. The clients' request was for a piece that helped them get out of the house and explore their 50-acre property. The wall is partially a reworking of an existing derelict fieldstone fence and was designed for walking on top of, elevating one above the fields to take in the view. It was completed in 2004. In the distance you can see his piece *Rock Shelter* which was done in 2007.

SWEPT^{UP IN} STONE

Dan Snow's reverence for the land and local cultures is built into his enduring stone creations

BY LINDSEY TAYLOR | PHOTOGRAPHY BY INGALLS PHOTOGRAPHY





Rock Shelter, completed in approximately three weeks, sits on the same property as *Walking Wall* in Newfane, Vermont. Snow's clients call it the "Sun Shelter" since they can often be found sitting on chairs nestled in the "frame" taking in the warm rays of the sun.

Stone artist and dry stone waller Dan Snow's gift is that he sees beauty everywhere he looks. The land—its topography, waterways, natural landforms—is all he needs for inspiration. As he says, "I don't have to go far from the location of my work to be swept up in the physical dramas and cultural dynamics that move within and across the native landscape." Whether he is working in New England, which is his home base; at the Kerava Art Museum near Helsinki, Finland; or in Langeland, Denmark, where he installed a site-specific piece called *Diamond Mines*, he gathers energy for his art from the earth.

The technique he uses is called "dry stone construction," a craft that's been used for millennia and refers to the technique of carefully placing stones on top of one another, without using mortar, to create a sound structure. Remnants of dry stone work can be found as far back as the pyramids of Egypt or the Neolithic settlements of Western Europe, like Skara Brae in Scotland that's around 5,000 years old. The dry stone construction technique was also utilized by farmers around the world; using rock from their land, they built stone fences to keep livestock penned and crops enclosed. These walls lasted centuries since they were flexible (allowing foundation settlement without damage) and free draining. In a mortared wall, frozen rain and snow can get trapped in the seams, pushing the joints apart and damaging the structure.

Snow's reverence for the land and local culture is aligned with the origins of this ancient building method. Over the years, he has dedicated himself to studying different cultures and ways they have worked with stone—this depth of knowledge is evident in his work. His creations range in shape and scale to include pieces that are built to be used: sheep sheds, fire pits, portals, archers' pavilions, planting beds, seat walls, and grottos (to name a few). Yet Snow's aim is to practice this age-old craft, not to revive it; he is applying the trade in his time as others did in theirs.

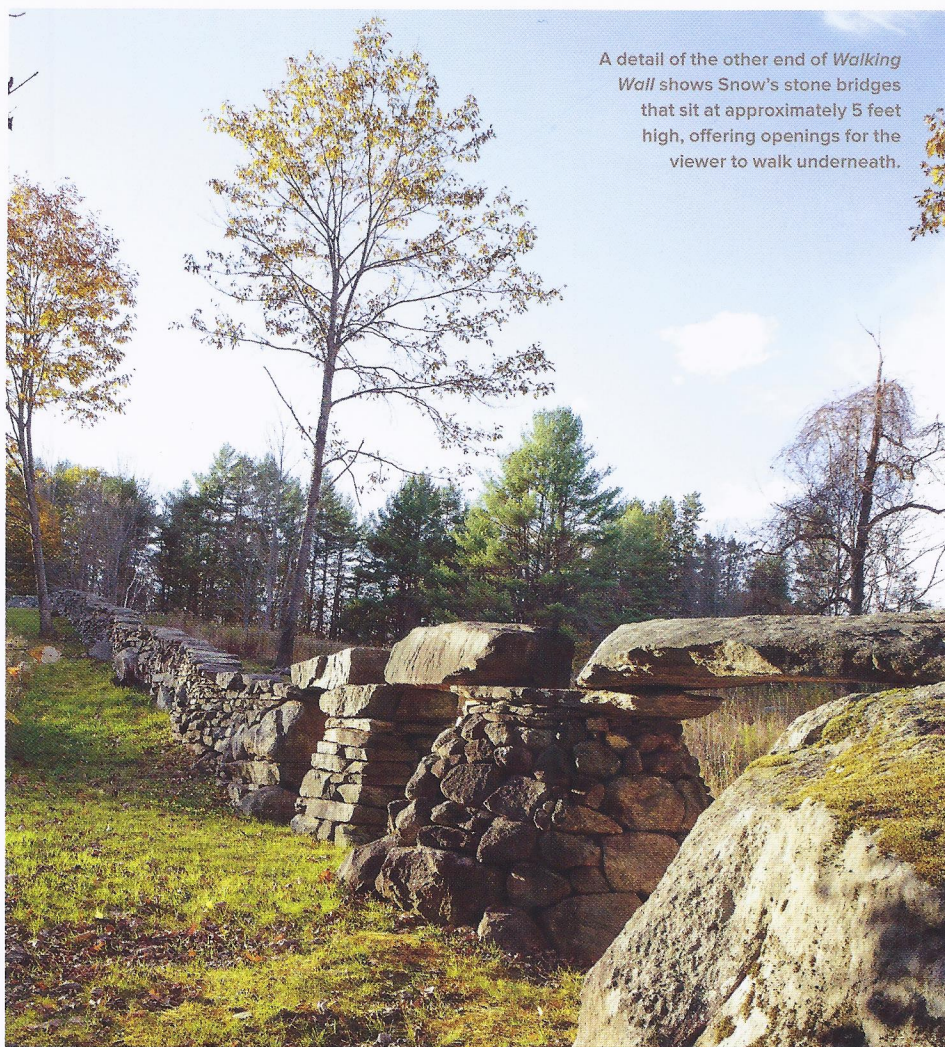
Snow studied Art and Industrial Design at

Pratt Institute where he became proficient in model building, a skill that he employs when creating scaled models of his pieces. After college, Snow interned with galleries in New York City, which educated and honed his artist eye and vision, and he became aware of the notion that art can be made anywhere, at any time. Snow traces the origins of his love of stone to a job he had when he was 20 years old, helping a team reconstruct a thirteenth-century castle in Italy. "We just had stone to work with since no woodworking was going on during that phase of rebuilding. I was completely immersed, and really got the hang of how to make things out of stone."

Snow is sometimes compared to environmental artists, like Andy Goldsworthy and the late Robert Smithson, but his work tends to be more functional, and his pieces are typically commissioned works, intimately fused

with the environments in which they're made. His goal is to create pieces that visitors interact with: seats, steps, a place to make a fire. "All my pieces have a purpose even if they are sculptural, offering a place of contemplation or for gathering. There needs to be an interaction with a visitor to ignite it," says Snow.

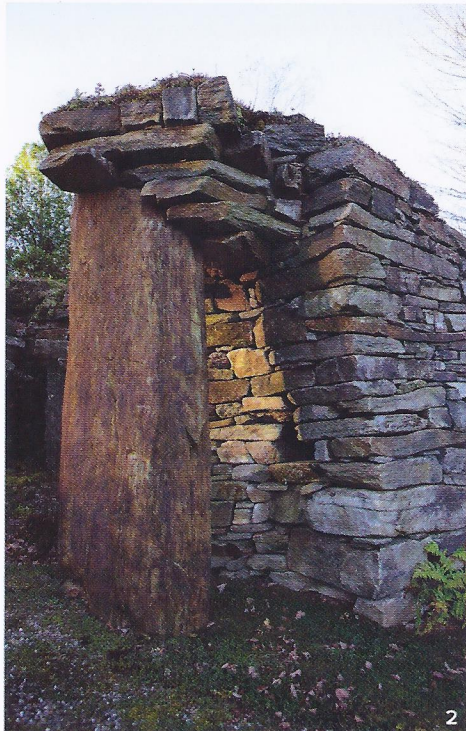
Having spent years perfecting his relationship with his medium, Snow seems to magically turn stone into a fluid material—it bends in ways that seem impossible; his forms seem to defy gravity. Indeed Snow collaborates with gravity, finding equilibrium with the placement of each stone. He occasionally gets help with the initial trench digging or gathering of the bigger pieces, but when it comes to laying the stones it is Snow alone, chipping and hammering and knowing where each piece needs to go. As he likes to say, "I work alone but I'm always in the company of stone." In fact, the



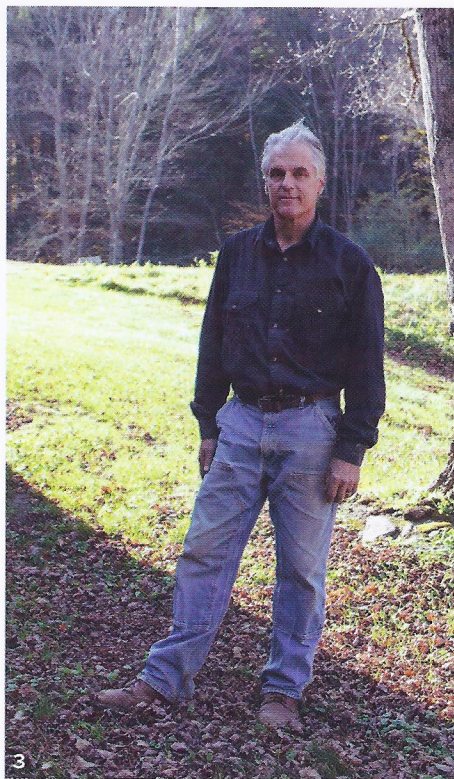
A detail of the other end of *Walking Wall* shows Snow's stone bridges that sit at approximately 5 feet high, offering openings for the viewer to walk underneath.



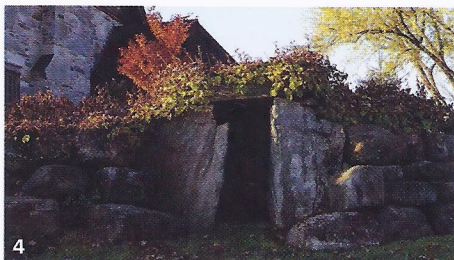
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1 *Portal*, completed in Dummerston, Vermont, is 6 feet tall and made from mica schist. Snow's inspiration was the curved stone at the top of the piece that he found on a nearby wooded property. 2 A detail of a much larger work, *Grotto Monolith*, that was created for a client in Walpole, New Hampshire. Snow rigged a number of waterlines hidden in the structure that seep water through the piece. The large stone in the foreground is about 7 feet tall. 3 Dan Snow photographed in Newfane, Vermont. 4 For this commission, the client in Springfield, Vermont, who was restoring an 1800s stone house, requested a piece that looked as though it were older than the house to suggest a prehistoric structure. Called *Monk's Cave*, it is reminiscent of an Irish burial place.

title of his first book is: *In the Company of Stone* (Artisan, 2007). "The stones' shapes and sizes, their hardness or softness, interest me," notes Snow. "And naturally formed stone is my medium of expression wherever I happen to be. In Oregon, I worked with basalt, in Kentucky, limestone, in Finland, granite." After 38 years of experience working with stone, his passion and enthusiasm for the material he has dedicated his life to have not faded. Though not schooled in geology, he's totally tuned in when it comes to stone.

Working with available resources is cru-

cial to Snow, and the loose stones that the local land offers are his main resource. When he starts a new project the first thing he looks for is what's on site. "It's always a treasure hunt and that's what keeps it compelling for me. I don't know from one project to the next what stone I'll find and therefore what might be possible to make. I look for abundance as well as variety. If those attributes are present my palette is full," shares Snow.

If there's not enough stone on a location, he looks to nearby aggregate suppliers to purchase "tailings," the cobbles and boulders

cast-off during the process of screening sand and gravel from natural stone deposits laid down by prehistoric glacial activity. But quarried stone is not his thing; Snow points out that there's enough naturally loose stone that has more variety in terms of shape, and texture, compared with the quarried type. And stone that's been weathered is smoother, and nicer to handle as opposed to the sharper edges of the quarried class. He also sees a quality in natural local stone that's more wholesome, more authentic, and believes it has a feel and look that's more pleasing to the eye. "I enter a partnership with the surroundings. When you impose something that doesn't belong, it is easy to make a mess. I want to make a small footprint with my work," expounds Snow.

Landscape architect Robin Key has known Snow for many years. She has been fortunate to work with Snow on her own property in Vermont, where he constructed walls of masterful beauty. Recently he worked on a monumental winding columbarium stone wall for a cemetery in Norfolk, Connecticut, that they collaborated on. "Dan is the real deal. He is an authentic person with a thoughtful and creative nature. He has an uncanny ability to know each stone and where it should be placed without hesitation. A true artist spirit, who is amazing to watch in action," says Key.

Snow's career has taken him many places, with commissions at major institutions and public parks. His rush comes from observing the local land, people, and culture, and translating it all into his work. When asked if there was anywhere he'd like to leave his mark that he hasn't already, Snow ponders the question for a moment and then responds "the desert." But for Snow, it's not about conquering the land. "The natural world does just fine on its own. When you start with a beautiful surrounding you have to be very cautious—you have to find the balance between nature and the hand of man," shares Snow. He's just happy working in a place with plenty of loose stone at his fingertips and where he has the freedom to create sculptural, useful pieces that bring people together. 6



A section of a 5-foot-tall rectangular stone wall that encloses a fruit and vegetable garden. It was created in 2001 in Springfield, Vermont, and was made from glacial till found on the property.