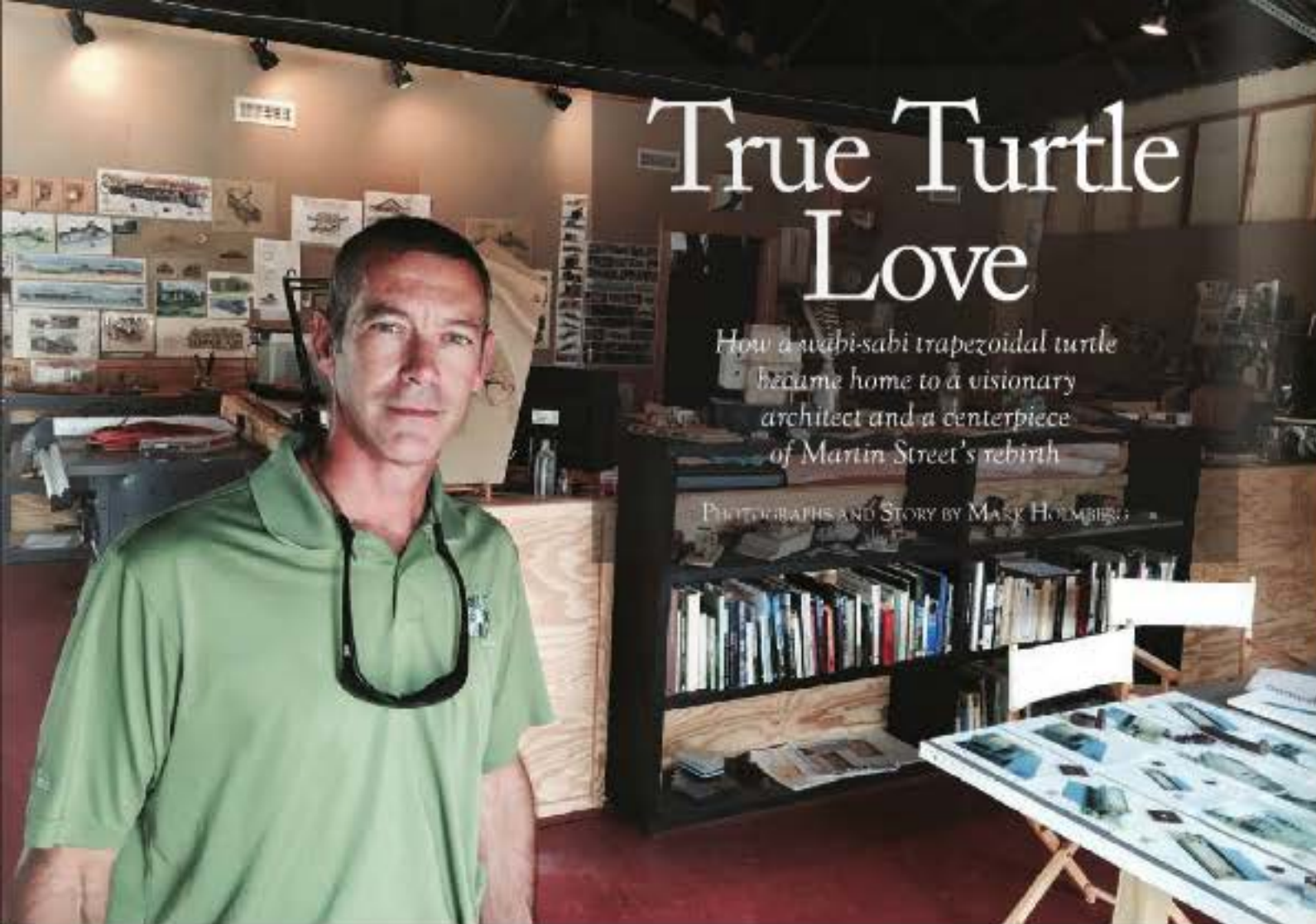




True Turtle Love

How a wabi-sabi trapezoidal turtle became home to a visionary architect and a centerpiece of Martin Street's rebirth

PHOTOGRAPHS AND STORY BY MARK HOLMBERG

Who, look at that place! That's what came to mind during a motorcycle exploration of the port side of Wilmington on a battleship grey day last December. It's a favorite thing to do. Walking, biking, motorcoring... sizing up haunted houses and vacant commercial buildings for offbeat dream-home renovations.

This was a railroad-side dump on Martin Street just off South Third with a crazy shape and roof like a turtle's back. In fact, it squatted there as if it had crawled out of the monster debris pile on the other side of the track. But cut some big holes for windows, let in some light, scare off the hoboes... ride the motorcycle up the ramp right into your living room!

Two weeks later we returned to find much of the yard trash cleaned up. The pie-shaped block building had started turning blue.

And we met the guy who beat us to it.

"I first saw it when I was driving around last maybe fifteen years ago," said 43-year-old Kevin Pfirman. "I couldn't believe my eyes. It's trapezoidal!"

Probably only an architect would sum up the tough ol' turtle with that one word, and that's what Kevin is—a local architect. He's also the guy you'd pick out of central casting to rehab this place. Lean and leathery, brown and hard as a Brazil nut.

Nature Boy. A surfer who grew up dodging rebar and rusty steel in the menacing break at Atlantic City, New Jersey.

"Oh man, that's unique," he recalled thinking during his first glance.

"There's not another site like this in town."

And probably, the world.

When the lease ran out on his architectural office on North Fourth Street last fall, he drove by the turtle again and again, falling in love with its "railroad industrial design.... Everything's got this wabi-sabi patina."

It reminded him of the raw and rusty break at Atlantic City and the renegade vibe captured in Ron Howard's classic surf/skate documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*.

"It had that gritty, wrong-side-of-the-tracks feel. I can cause all the trouble I want here." So he tracked down the owners, Clayton Williams and his wife, Dottie.

Williams, cut from similar (but older) cloth, had run his trucking company out of the building. Before that, another trucking firm had originally built it in 1920.

The building's wedge shape was an organic fit for the lot, Kevin explained. "It's the setbacks." The railroad tracks slice the property into a scalene triangle—no sides are equal. "They just built to a point where they run out of room for garage doors" for the loading docks.

"Was there a drawing made?" he asked skeptically. "I don't know... I don't think there's a reason for another building like this anywhere."

The surfer and the trucker shook hands on a \$175,000, owner-financed, no-money-down deal, and Kevin, surprised and grateful at his good fortune, went to work.

By March 4, Kevin's relentless, hermit-like attack on the tough, trapezoidal turtle was revealing the prince within.

"I want to quit work and just work on this," he said.

The roof, wiring and HVAC work was done. So were the rough-hewn bath room and hallway, made from hardwood pallet planks.

The "battleship puzzle" paint job was pretty much done.

He'd called me over to lay a few blocks to fill in an old vent on the side of the building while he and his draftsman/close friend/fishing buddy Channing Glower sunk railroad ties for fence posts into the rockhard ground of the yard. (Don't dare run into one!)

Channing is one of those guys who never shirks a task and wades right into a nasty chore with an untroubled smile, like Deets from *Lonesome Dove*. He's a key part of the Martin Street makeover, and Kevin knows how blessed he is to have a friend like him.

"He brought me over here the first time," Channing recalled between thrusts with the posthole diggers that you could feel through your shoes. "He opened the door... Oh my God! Rats!"

But he, too, fell for the funky old turtle.

"I love coming over here. Every little part of it is a challenge."

And a revelation, Channing added. As they restored and explored and marched and capoled, they figured out the thought processes of the craftsmen who built it.

"Every weld is different," Kevin said, certain the unique steel bowstring trusses were built on-site, by feel, along with the yellow pine rafters.

Together they translated the architectural haiku of the building, preserving and expanding on the Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetic of imperfection, asymmetry, austerity, roughness.

"You don't want to undo that," Kevin said.

During a lunch break at the nearby Harp that bright afternoon, Kevin explained he came to North Carolina for architecture school at UNC Charlotte, where he met Channing. The surf then pulled him east to Wilmington, where he married and had two boys. (He since split but shares custody.)

His college thesis—the siting and design of coastal buildings of North Carolina—sums up his architectural anchor. "We don't necessarily build the way we should" near the water, he said, picking at his fish sandwich. (No wonder he's so wiry.)

We still use a lot of wood, metal and masonry, materials that don't mix well with water and salt, he explained. Why not "aerodynamic fiberglass panels, like a boat? All things maritime. Stainless everything. How cool would it be to wax your house," like a surfboard, he asked, instead of painting it?

The summer grew hot as the turtle was inspected and approved, and Kevin gradually moved in. We'd stop in to see him or run into him on the beach with his girlfriend.

His current projects were unfolding—an organic house in Costa Rica; a modernistic house on Wrightsville Beach incorporating his sea-friendly philosophy; an outdoor concert shell/amphitheater that seats 5,000 just off the new Riverwalk on the starboard side of downtown.

His shoulder—a torn labrum—was killing him, but he kept postponing surgery for surf trips, his design jobs and, of course, his pet project on Martin Street. He had spent—gladly—twice what he had planned on the renovation, he admitted as we sat inside by the giant, rough-hewn custom window on a sultry hot July afternoon. The HVAC had the old shipping building comfortably chill. Stevie Ray Vaughan added to the mellowness.

"I like life-specific things," he said. "Anything we design looks like it grew there."

Or crawled there.

He looked around the space, ticking off all the little unfinished details.

"The hardest thing is knowing when to stop," he said.

Indeed. Without those undone touches, the trapezoidal turtle would magically lose its wabi-sabi.

And it might just crawl away. 🐢

