

The Woodwalk Gallery of Wisconsin

A couple turns a vacant barn into a warm gallerying place for artists and friends

BY JUDITH FAIRLY

IN 1994, ARTIST Margaret Lockwood and her husband, Allan Walker, bought an old farmhouse on 10 acres in Egg Harbor, Door County, Wisconsin, that came with a cairy barn built in the 1890s. At the time, Lockwood was happily employed in her art studio, a converted one-room schoolhouse, and had no plans to change that. But there was something about the old barn. "Artists are savers of things," says Lockwood, whose abstract tapestries of the natural world—water, trees, clouds—recall her background as a weaver.

Seven years later, the barn had evolved into Woodwalk Gallery, a gathering place where art meets agriculture. This past season, the barn hosted 4,500 visitors for fine art, musical and theatrical events, and the spruced-up property is booked every Saturday for the next year in each other's endeavors. The downstairs gallery features the work of 44 regional artists and shares space in that barn with a studio for handmade paper. Next to the gallery, visitors can take a winding path through an outdoor sculpture garden and just beyond to a labyrinth composed of six concentric circles, each of the paths the width of Walker's lava tractor.

Within a span of a few years, the Woodwalk Gallery has been transformed from a neglected barn on the path to a destination in a welcoming art destination for Door County. Walker attributes this to his and Lockwood's embrace of *wabi-sabi*, an aesthetic of Japanese origin that holds importance in high regard and appreciates objects that display the marks of time. Like generations of farmers before them, Walker and Lockwood had a use



south of the Great Lakes and ends in central Wisconsin. Walker says that is the geography that attracts artists, and the synergy of the arts community that makes them want to stay. There are 250 active painters in the area, both professional and amateur, and 90 galleries within 90 miles. As the Door County barns fall victim to foreclosure, it's the creative community that's preserving these buildings of Wisconsin's agricultural heritage by transforming them into wonderful galleries, art studios, and



ABOVE: The wooden barn was converted into an art gallery and a performance and community center. Lockwood's strategy of utilizing an entire set of space on the property resulted in a three-level construction—made of the unlikely combination of a barn, woodshed and spokeshave workshop. Strong white lights that sparkle like tiny stars—like a reference to the rugged beauty of well-used wood—illuminate the space.

The Wabi-Sabi of Woodwalk Gallery

BY KATIE DAHL



the leisurely spread of buildings at Woodwalk Gallery – a large barn, a few silos, an old farmhouse – are not unlike most of the structures on the Door Peninsula: hardy, practical, and stolidly European. So Woodwalk co-owner Allin Walker readily admits the incongruity of adopting the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi as the guiding principle of the gallery.

It is “slightly absurd,” Walker says. “I mean, there’s nothing Japanese about the place.” And yet wabi-sabi has “become for us a philosophical grounding...It’s the beauty of things that have been used and loved and taken on a beauty of their own.”

Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic that finds beauty in the humble, the rustic, the impermanent, and the imperfect. Allin Walker and Margaret Lockwood (Walker’s wife and co-owner of Woodwalk) first

learned about the concept in a book they received from a friend and have come to find it a fitting framework for the beauty they find in their livestock-barn-turned-art-gallery, located south of Egg Harbor on County Road G.

“There’s a wonderful imperfectness of wabi-sabi,” Walker explains. “And so I spent a fair amount of time for a while just reading about it...My favorite example is a hammer we have with a hickory



Since its founding in 1994, Woodwalk Gallery has become a versatile and thriving arts venue -- acting as studio, gallery, theater and music space as well as a unique wedding venue. (Opposite page) Original artwork by Margaret Lockwood. Photos by Len Villano.

handle, and you can see the imprint of the oil from the farmer's hand on it. It's really a gorgeous thing."

Walker and Lockwood go on to cite other wabi-sabi elements of Woodwalk: the rusting tractor gears that are embedded in the concrete floor of the barn, a barn wall full of items they've unearthed from the property, and a chandelier made of recycled farm equipment that hangs in the building's entryway.

Though they learned about the concept only after they completed the years-long process of renovating their barn

into a thriving painting studio, art gallery, theater, and music space, the flexibility and enthusiasm for imperfection that defines wabi-sabi has characterized Lockwood and Walker since they first founded Woodwalk Gallery in 1994.

Woodwalk (the name is a combination of "Lockwood" and "Walker") originally began in an old schoolhouse in Juddville. The gallery has always featured work by a range of artists, including Lockwood's

INFORMATION

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WEBSITE: www.woodwalkgallery.com



ROCHESTER

(Above left) Original artwork by Margaret Lockwood. (Above right) Margaret Lockwood and Allin Walker, married co-owners of Woodwalk, weaved the Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetic into the design of their gallery. This aesthetic is evident in small details like the rusting tractor gears embedded in the concrete floor, or a chandelier made from recycled farm equipment. Photos by Len Villano.

Lockwood had decided to create a gallery in the barn as well.

"My heart was here in my studio and yet all my artwork was there in Juddville," Lockwood says. "I wanted to be *here*."

So Lockwood and Walker hired a crew, including Frost, Dave Gissel, Rich Higdon, Mark Moede, and Matt Stender, to embark on a full renovation of the barn, a project whose trajectory shifted

frequently to accommodate Lockwood and Walker's ever-expanding vision. The new gallery location opened for business in May 2007.

"It was a brainstorming session every morning," recalls Mark Moede, "meetings with Allin and Margaret to figure out what the project was this week or today, and the goals would change... It certainly was one of the best jobs I've ever been involved in, because of Allin

and Margaret and their openness to the ideas."

"More than half of what's going on there now was never part of the plan," says Matt Stender, referencing the many ventures Woodwalk Gallery has added to its operation over the years: weddings, events for local non-profits, a weekly summer music series, regular theatrical productions, a papermaking studio, a sculpture garden and a labyrinth. "These



Photo courtesy of Woodwalk Gallery.

distinctive, abstract oil paintings, many of which explore spacious, light-infused landscapes. Woodwalk's current roster boasts 43 artists whose media include clay, wood, metal, and all manner of paints. The artists, most of whom live in Wisconsin, are hand-picked by Lockwood.

Lockwood (who manages the artistic side of the gallery in addition to producing her own work) and Walker (who

serves as Woodwalk's general manager) bought the property on County Road G in 2005. Initially, Lockwood planned to maintain her painting studio at their previous gallery in Juddville. But Lockwood quickly tired of commuting to her studio.

She remembers, "I said something like, 'Oh, I wish I had a studio here.' The next thing I know, Allin...bought two hours of architectural service at a Unitarian

auction. What he had [the architect] do was design what a studio would look like in the barn."

The barn, originally built in the 1890s, had fallen into disrepair. So Lockwood and Walker asked straw bale builder Erik Frost and a few of his associates to lead the construction of a straw bale studio in the barn's hay mow. Construction on the studio was completed in March 2006, and by July of that year Walker and

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opportunities arose and it worked and [Allin and Margaret] ran with it."

To Walker, the renovation team's collaborative approach to the barn project is a prime example of the wabi-sabi aesthetic.

"We had the luxury of saying to them, put love into the place," Walker says. "Wabi-sabi." Walker points to an ornamental bird's-eye figure carved in the wood of Lockwood's studio. "Wonderful little things like that. Them pouring love in." The work crew's names are even signed in the barn's concrete floor.

The lasting mark the renovation crew left on the building is just the most recent layer of the barn's long history. Musician Jeanne Kuhns, who runs a weekly concert series at Woodwalk, believes that history makes the barn an ideal venue for the performing arts.

"The barn is beautiful," she says. "You can feel the music of the cows and the horses and the people soaked into the wood. It has good memories and good history. It's not just a barn."

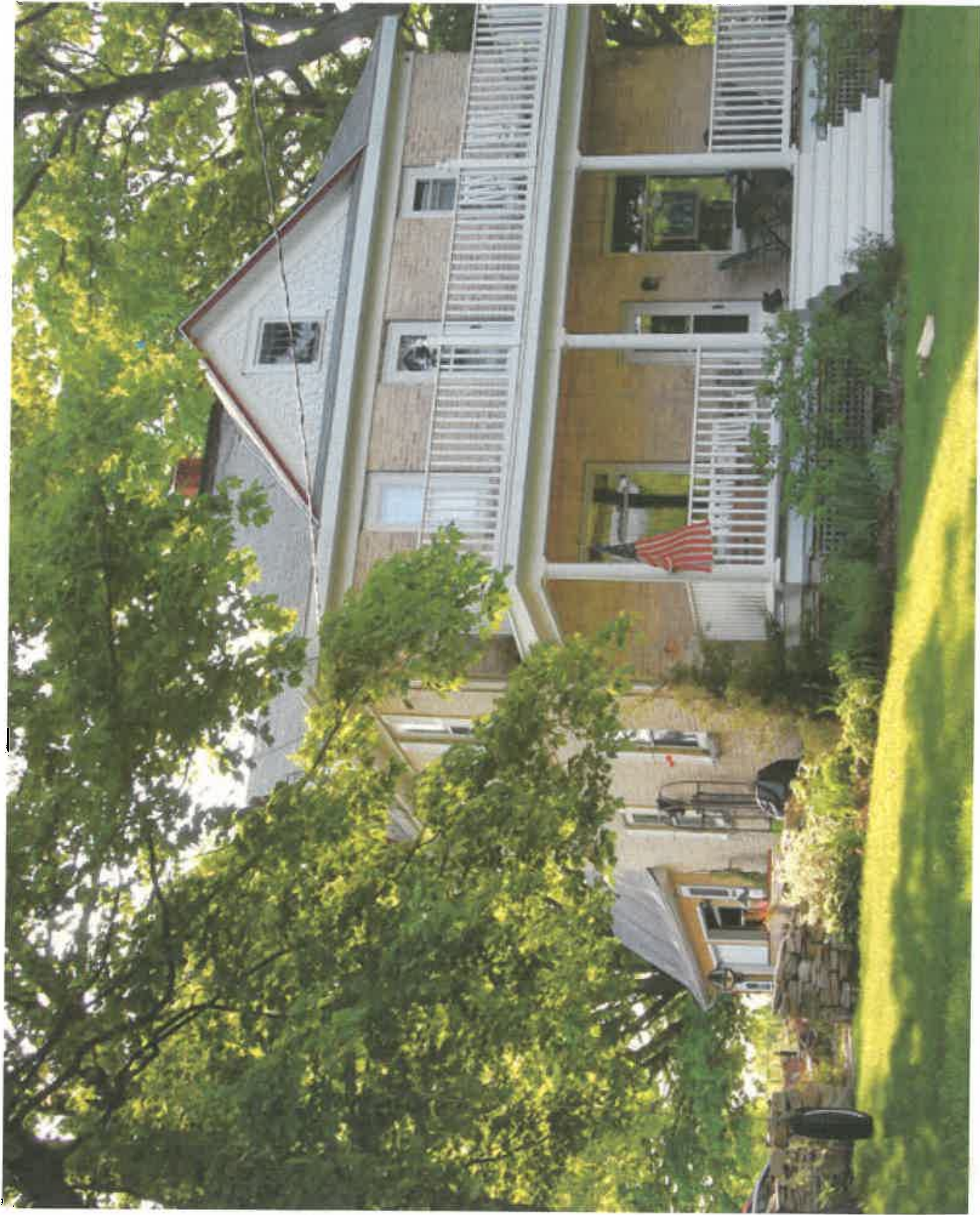
In turn, says Mark Moede, the vibrant array of weddings, plays, and concerts that now take place at Woodwalk are leaving an impression on the gallery and on Lockwood's studio.

"The married couples, before they get married, go up [to the studio] and talk. That studio is the green room for the concerts that happen there. So it's got all that vibe and energy and spirit. So much creative stuff happens. That doesn't just go away. Some of it stays in there."

For Lockwood and Walker, that exchange of energy is characteristic of the wabi-sabi beauty they've come to value.

"When people come now for weddings and things like that here," says Walker, "not only do they add something by being here. (If the walls could talk!) But really it pleases us that they seem to take something away from here as well."





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