

The town of St Denis des Murs was built with the purpose of being forgotten. Four hours south of Paris, an hour east of the city of Limoges, the tiny hamlet is nestled among rolling rivers and stunning vistas. It is easy to miss, even by those looking for it. There is a Medieval church, a mayor not quite as advanced in years, and a few dozen houses dotting the landscape, the slope of their earthen roofs bending to match the curves of lush green hills, as if the tiles grew native to the region alongside pear shaped trees and wildflowers. Here, traffic yields to umber cattle shuttling from one field to the next.

At the center of town, across from the church, stands an attached barn and small farmhouse. Engraved above the door, just discernible through the gradual wear of wind and rain, is the year of construction - 1609. The intervening centuries took their toll on the structure. Walls of rock and mortar chipped and crumbled onto dirt floors. At some point the barn roof buckled, collapsing from exhaustion and the weight of time. But the foundations and frame remained. Feudalism died, Enlightenment dawned, electricity sparked, the entire world twice plunged head long in to war while these buildings stood stoically by.

Then one day, the British and Americans arrived.

It all started one Spring evening in 2011 when UK born furniture designer, Chris Duffy, walked in to Wilton's Music Hall in East London to meet some friends for drinks. Duffy took in the vaulted ceilings, wood beams, and shrapnel pocked walls of the historic venue and exclaimed, "My place in France could look like this!"

Five years previously, Duffy had been struggling to build his design business, Duffy London. As his neighborhood gentrified around him, the first rung of the property ladder remained out of reach. Inspired by a trip to Italy where he and friends stayed in a renovated country property, Duffy began looking for a rural getaway of his own within his price range and easy traveling distance from London.

That is how he found St. Denis des Murs. After the church, the barn and house were the oldest structures in the town and were owned by the daughter of one of the original farming

families from the region. “When I first saw the place, it conjured up all kinds of fantasies of the dream of country living,” Duffy recalls. “I was burned out and looking for an escape from the hectic life of London. I could imagine myself coming there to enjoy a slower pace or to holiday with friends.” Duffy bought the property and put the rest of his savings toward renovations.

Then, disaster struck.

The contractor hired to refurbish the centuries old buildings absconded with Duffy’s money. A collapsing roof, no electricity, no plumbing, not even a wood-burning stove, the property was completely uninhabitable. And worse, Duffy had lost his heart for the project. The best he hoped for was the buildings would crumble and he might be able to sell the land one day.

That is, until the night at Wilton’s Music Hall.

Shannon Hopkins was among the group of friends that had turned out for drinks. A serial entrepreneur from Texas with a passion for projects designed to build community, Hopkins had been living in London for 7 years. She heard Duffy reference “his place in France” and was immediately hooked. She got him to tell the full story and before Duffy was done a scheme had already formed.

People are longing for community, Hopkins believed, and a chance to be a part of something that is bigger than themselves. Also, as home sharing sites like AirBnb have grown over the last decade, travelers have started looking to get more out of their vacations than the same hotels, tour buses, and shopping. More and more there is a premium placed on unique experiences and exposure to everyday life in other parts of the world. Hopkins couldn’t help wondering, what if there was a way to tap in to these desires and use them to save an abandoned 400 year old barn?

She immediately began reaching out to friends and contacts across the UK and US with a simple, if audacious, proposition. For the cost of a flight to France and a contribution toward expenses for a week, they could come to St. Denis des Murs. During the day, the assembled group would work on renovating the barn and farmhouse. At night, they would stay in nearby

gîtes where they would have a communal dinner, drink French wine, laugh, talk, and play games with strangers turned friends. When all the renovations were finished, anyone who worked on the project would get to come and stay free of charge.

“There was a lot of skepticism about whether the plan would work,” Hopkins remembers, “No one thought people would want to make the trip and definitely not pay to come.”

“I thought it was just pub talk,” Duffy confesses. “It all sounded great, but no way it was going to happen.”

The plan was fantastical, and yet, also apropos to both Duffy and Hopkins. Never one to sneak in to a room, Duffy enters with joy and boldness, two qualities also represented in his furniture. Hopkins is a warm and generous spirit who has never met a stranger. Behind that gregarious nature is a passion for what’s possible that invites and inspires those she meets to see possibility too.

The first trans-Atlantic group arrived in St. Denis des Murs in August 2011. An initial 2 week trip with 14 people turned in to an annual project. There was always one paid professional architect or contractor to oversee the work and a chef to prepare the evening meals. Everything else was done by amateurs.

Asked about their impressions after the first trip, Duffy laughs, “I thought, ‘Oh God! We made it worse!’” Hopkins confesses to realizing it was going to be a lot more work than she had imagined.

But they kept going.

Talk to veterans of “Chateau Duffy” (the cheeky name given to the dilapidated barn) and you’ll hear reference to “the trip where we poured the concrete floor,” “the week I spent tiling the bathroom,” and “the year of the septic tank.” There is “Rachel’s hole” where one woman spent an entire week digging beneath the foundations and through the floor of the farmhouse to install plumbing, using shovels, hammers, picks, and eventually even a spoon to finally break through. All the bricks on one broad expanse of wall were repointed and grouted exclusively to

the soundtrack of Hamilton. And then, of course, there was the roof, also known as “the year of assembling and disassembling scaffolding over and over.”

“I’ll never forget the time Andy (one of the more regular Chateau Duffy participants) fell through the second floor. And then he fell through again the next day. And then he did it again the next day!,” Duffy recalls. “It’s funny now, but I was always extremely stressed whenever there were even minor injuries.”

The residents of sleepy St. Denis des Murs were almost certainly unprepared for such an explosion of activity at the center of town. And, it is unclear how much the neighbors appreciated the year one brash Texan hung his state flag on the property gate, declaring territorial rights for the Lone Star state. Eventually, the group got on friendly terms with the mayor and started to get to know other residents. Neighbors would pop by to see the progress and sometimes lend a hand. Other expats who had immigrated to the area were drawn in. Relationships were formed among people and place as a core group returned year after year.

“One of the trips that has stuck with me,” Hopkins remembers, “is the year Gary, this NRA-loving, conservative Texan - the one who hung the Texas flag on the gate - worked alongside Iain, a British, post-evangelical, pacifist solicitor. During the day they worked repointing all the stone on a large outside wall. At night they would talk for hours trying to understand one another. A few years later, during the 2016 Presidential election in America, Gary told me those conversations had stayed with him.”

While the majority of participants came from the UK and Texas, Chateau Duffy attracted people all the way from California, Iceland, the Philippines, and Russia. They were artists, filmmakers, vicars, lawyers, teachers, consultants, designers, and entrepreneurs. During 14 weeks spanned over 8 years, the amateur builders repointed all the brick and stone walls for the 176 sq m property, poured two cement floors, reinforced and retiled a roof, constructed sleeping lofts, two bathrooms, and a custom kitchen, and installed electricity, plumbing, and a septic tank.

Less easy to capture than before and after shots of the barn are the stories of the community that sustained the project for close to a decade and the personal transformations that occurred. In total, over 90 people took part in the project between 2011 and 2019 with a core group of about a half dozen returning year after year. Parents who made the trip with young children talk about the shared family memories they now have. Others who came to the project against the backdrop of major life changes, including divorce and personal or professional burnout, share how Chateau Duffy provided a place of retreat and reflection.

One Chateau Duffy veteran described the experience by saying, “Strangers come together, get a little dusty, and talk about the things that matter most – their personal concerns and life’s biggest questions . . . Then there are these moments, and of course they tend to happen around a shared table, where something more is revealed, and deeper connections are made.”

“There’s joy, struggle, and friendship in the bricks,” Hopkins reflects.

The barn is now available for rent on Airbnb and during Covid has attracted a number of regional guests needing a change of scenery amidst pandemic lockdowns. The farmhouse, currently being used for storage, needs a bit more work before it is ready for guests. There is talk of a reunion trip so veterans of the project can see for themselves the progress made. But all that will have to wait until international travel becomes easier again.

When asked about the experience, Duffy reflects “It was a modern barn raising. There are thousands of memories and, really, it is all quite amazing, not just the house, but the community that continues today. I hope the people that worked on it will use it as their own, because it’s theirs as much as it is mine.” Hopkins is already dreaming of what’s next.