

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

Ice be dammed

Peninsula Permaculture · February 18, 2021 · Page A-8



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Valentine's Day ice dams shattered as freezing rain fell on Harstine Island snows. (Photo courtesy of Danielle Howard)

Matthew 7:24-27 of the New Testament says one must build their house on rock instead of sand, lest their house “fall with a great crash” at the confluence of rains, winds and rising streams. What about building your house on landfill? Current examples abound in Washington, including those in Bellingham, Everson and Everett.

I have a feeling that the ancestors might disapprove, but they couldn't imagine what we're dealing with. Nor could they conceive, in the expanse of a few generations' wisdom, that a house design might suffer environmental handicaps in one human lifetime.

It's an old saying that no one in the Northwest knows how to drive in snow. I've seen YouTube videos of steep Seattle streets crowned by condos, where the residents would gather with wine and video cameras to watch what happened when the snow began to stick: buses sliding into lampposts, cars fishtailing, garbage cans rolling downhill with Donkey Kong chaos.

To be fair, those are city people. They could be from anywhere, and be here for any reason. California boomers might not have heard of snow except in “It's a Wonderful Life.” On the Olympic Peninsula, you had better know how to deal — significant snowfalls seem to be happening at shorter intervals.

In Mason County, we heard of stuck cars, flattened mailboxes in Johnson Point, and lots of collapsed carports from Harstine to Steamboat. On the social network site Nextdoor, I learned that ratchet-strapping the rafters of carports together helps reinforce them.

I'd never seen a carport until arriving here. Arizona sun would have crisped them, and Northeastern snows would have imploded them. I lived in the Northeast for long enough that knocking ice dams off this house seemed imperative, but I don't know how residences are built here. What happens to all the water behind that backed up ice — have builders in Western Washington provided for drainage?

We need to consider environmental shifts as we build and plant for the future. Wildfires and blizzards might be here to stay, but our native dampness and Mediterranean summers are still the default. Development is happening apace in our region. How much of it is guided by sound architectural policy?

Harstine Island friends who worked as volunteer firefighters told me every house fire out here is a foundation fire — nothing can be stopped from burning to the ground. This was during a summer when a couple of those happened. So why do we still build houses from flammable lumber, or SIPs (Structural Insulated Panels) that trap and stifle air, besides absorbing water into their OSB layers and sometimes burning horribly as their foam cores liquefy? Habit? Entrenched interests?

I grew up in Arizona, where stucco and adobe made a lot of sense. Their derivations flavor the Southwest's mainstream architecture.

This column obviously isn't about how much I know about building. It's about the questions we all should ask as we buy buildings or vehicles. I'll admit to driving a rear-wheel drive pickup from Pennsylvania in my first years here. I didn't think there was anything wrong with it until I'd been here a year.

Tow trucks winched me up clay hills on my own property when my rear-wheel half-ton was fully loaded with firewood — I'd thought, like a Northeasterner, that enough weight on the back axle was enough for grip and control. I had yet to learn about steep hills and clay.

As last weekend's snowstorm bore down, someone on Nextdoor offered to pull people out of trouble for \$50. Anyone who's waited for a tow truck will know that was an OK deal.

So many of us are from somewhere else, and the goalposts are moving where we are. My bamboos weathered this year's blizzard when 2019's nearly snapped them. No one in the Bible built on glacial till — and it's the variety of our foundation and micro-climates that makes us resilient.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

Originally published in the print edition of the Shelton-Mason County Journal, February 18, 2021, page A-8.

Transcribed from the page scan in the SmallTownPapers archive: <https://smc.stparchive.com/Archive/SMC/SMC02182021P08.php>