

# Cabinology with Dale Mulfinger

## Ologies Podcast

### June 25, 2019

Oh Hey! It's that friend who can't sit at a diner table without making modular sculptures with the half & half creamers, can't not do it! Alie Ward, back with another episode of *Ologies*. Great news, kiddos! I got some news for you. You ready? This episode is not about ticks. Yesss! Are you stoked? Now that we have covered some basic health and safety, i.e. me just reminding you, check those crevices, kind of like a flight attendant demonstrating an inflatable vest. But now you know, let's get this summer show on the road. There are sprinklers to run through, there's campfire smoke to dodge, some sandal tans to get, barbeques, reunions.

Before we hit the road, let's make a pit stop at ThankYouVille, to say thanks to all the folks supporting this podcast on Patreon. I literally could not make the show without you. Thank you to all the folks wearing *Ologies* merch on your actual physical bodies and talking up the show to your fam while you make pies. Thank you to everyone who, for zero dollars, rate, and subscribes, and leaves the reviews for me to read, because you know I do, like a lady creep. And then I read you one aloud, such as this fresh one from CrazyDogMom1227 who compared me to a, "*gently excited Richard Simmons but for science instead of high kicks.*" And said that I'll, "*Teach about all sorts of things, especially things that you didn't think you'd find interesting. Here's looking at your ticks.*" Also thank you to Faaaabulous for the review. You have my permission to cry in the car now on the way to work.

Cabinology, oh boy howdy! Let me say right now, I love cabins! I think I'm obsessed with them. I look for cheap deals to rent them. I have dreams about them. I Pinterest them. I don't Pinterest anything! I covet them, I admire them. In fact, this past week, I found a photo I took in my phone from five years ago, of one of this guest's books without even knowing who he was or that I would meet him. I follow many #cabinporn Instagrams, which has everything to do with cabins, literally nothing to do with naked people. I see pictures of cabins that I want to hug too hard like something cute that you'd squeeze to the point of peril. So, let's dive into a subject I could not be more excited about.

The word cabin come from the Latin word for 'hut', and PS, 'cabana' is related. How did I never realize that?? Duh, wow, okay. Cabinology is a relatively new, but established term. It was coined in relation to this ologist's work and career. I first became aware of this ology blissfully enough actually, while in a lodge in wilds of Montana. It was the summer of 2017. I was surrounded by my huge, weird family that I love.

Side note, my dad is one of 11 kids, so the Ward family reunions, they're roughly half the size of a summer music festival. They're a party. And I was drinking an evening margarita out of a chipped coffee mug and the sounds of my elders crushing each other in a pinochle game two tables over. I thumbed through this outdoorsy magazine; I saw the byline of this very guest touting himself as a cabinologist. Like, "Hot damn." I vowed to myself, "I will find this cabinologist when I finally launch that *Ologies* podcast in my future and I will interview him." And so indeed I did and you're about to listen to it. The stuff dreams are made of!

So this spring, I made my way to Minneapolis, Minnesota where his headquarters of his architecture firm are. It's SALA, which he said means, 'special room' in Italian, and it also stands for the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture. So, I went up some breezy stairs to his crisp downtown

office, filled with light wood and clean lines, high ceilings, and a lot of airy white. And we cabin chatted.

We cover, what *is* a cabin? When does a cabin just become a house? And why are they so cozy? And what makes cabins horror flick fodder? How is a summer cabin visit different than a winter one? How do you build one? What about those weird Franken-cabins built out of old stuff from a bunch of different buildings? How big should the windows be, and which way should they face? How do you even design a cabin? And in all caps bold italics: **WHY ARE CABINS THE BEST?!**

So, come watch the sunset, drag a chair to the fire pit, pour a mug of whatever's handy, and breath in an episode with an architect, author, expert, and a warm bright lantern of a person, Cabinologist, Dale Mulfinger.

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**Alie Ward:** And I might make you scooch into this just a little bit more. These are like stage mics, so they're like, get on up in it. Now, you are a cabinologist.

**Dale Mulfinger:** I am a cabinologist. It was anointed upon me by an external person, actually. A radio personality, who upon hearing that I was researching cabins with students at the university, he announced on the radio that I must be a cabinologist. So I consider myself having an instantaneous PhD.

**Alie:** How long ago was that?

**Dale:** Oh, that was probably about 15 years ago.

**Alie:** Were you like, "Well, I'm changing my business cards"?

**Dale:** That's it, yeah. I adopted it immediately and I've been using it since, and I wrote a book called *Cabinology* after it. I always credit this person who gave me that name. I didn't invent it for myself.

**Aside:** Credit goes to Minnesota *Garage Logic* radio host, Joe Soucheray for dropping that C-word so many years ago. As for Dale's bibliography, it's extensive. Between designing cabins, he's also managed to churn out a bunch of books including: *The Cabin: Inspiration for the Classic American Getaway*; *The Getaway Home: Discovering Your Home Away from Home*; *The Family Cabin: Inspiration for Camps Cottages and Cabins*; *Cabinology: A Handbook to Your Private Hideaway*. In his author bio he is credited as a cabinologist, the dude has earned it.

**Alie:** You've been a cabinologist for at least 15 years, but how long have you been a cabinologist in practice, not just in title?

**Dale:** Well, probably about 30 years ago, as a part of my architectural practice, we designed residential homes, I was asked to do my first cabin design. And I realized then that although I grew up in cabin world, Minnesota and Wisconsin, I didn't grow up with a cabin in my family background, so I had not spent much time there. And as I might often do when I get asked to design something I'm not used to, I try and do some research. And in this instance, I thought, "Well, it'd be fun to do some research with my students at the university."

So I hustled a few students over to do a summer class, and the essence of the summer class was, "Let's go out into cabin land." Every student and myself included, would have to document 10 cabins. And out of those 10 cabins, we would say, "Which cabin feels more cabin-like than any of the rest and why?" I was telling them, "Search for the quintessential cabin." So, we did that, and we learned a little bit along that process.

And a good friend of mine who was the editor of a local magazine said, “Well, if you find anything interesting in this process, why don’t you write an article in my magazine?” I wrote my first article, and then I wrote my second article, third and fourth, and ultimately 72 articles over 12 years. [“Heck yeah!”]

I’m always researching, so these were little brief vignettes about some cabin that interested me for some reason. Vertical logs... We’re all familiar with horizontal log cabins, but all of a sudden there, I noticed some that have vertical logs, which turns out that it’s an old French trappers’ method. So, coming into Minnesota and the northern part of the country in northern Wisconsin, you have French trappers who made quick cabins, and the vertical log technique allowed them, essentially single handedly, to make a simple shelter.

**Aside:** Okay, so side note. I looked these up and apparently vertical log cabins are also easier to build because you can use a bunch of 10-foot-tall logs up and down, instead of having to find and drag perfectly straight 20-40-foot logs to lay horizontally. In addition to vertical logs just being more slimming than horizontal logs, they were also tested by time.

Before the French fur trappers traipsed about harvesting beavers and such, Indigenous folks like the Yurok tribes and Chinook peoples had been building vertical plank houses out of cedar in the Pacific Northwest for thousands of years. They knew what was up.

**Dale:** And that tradition sustained itself for a while. So, finding out why vertical logs, who did it, all those things, they’re fun. It’s fun to see somebody turn a building that you wouldn’t expect to be a cabin into a cabin; a small church, or a school, box car, train car, a caboose. A lot of cabins are inventive as to, somebody’s got a crazy idea and they say, “Oh, that’d be fun as a cabin.” So, they just try it. Metal container buildings.

**Aside:** Dale explained: two things that separate cabins from houses are cabins typically don’t have garages and the master bedrooms don’t usually have en suite bathrooms. So rather than hide away in your big bedroom, using your toilet away from the rest of the family, all the bedrooms tend to branch off a main living space so people can spend this time in nature bonding together and being lovingly in each other’s business.

**Dale:** Privacy is not a particularly big issue in a cabin.

**Alie:** Tell me a little bit about square footage. Can you have 2,000 square foot cabin?

**Dale:** Yes.

**Alie:** Okay you can. So, what makes it a cabin?

**Dale:** I think what makes it a cabin are some of its attributes; how it flows, whether it captures views or things that are important to the land that you’re connected to. But yes, you can have a larger structure that is a cabin, maybe because you’re gathering a lot of people there.

My last book that I wrote was called *The Family Cabin* and it probably has projects in it that range from 400 square feet to 2,500 square feet, practically. Some cabins are created for extended family. I have one for two sisters, they’re each married, so they have husbands, they each have 4 kids, so now we’re talking about whatever that is 12 people. Then Grandma and Grandpa show up, there’s 14. You can’t do that in a 400 square-foot-structure. You need more space, more place for the activities of those youth as they’re growing and changing and they’re eventually bringing the Boy Scout troop with them or whatever. So yes, cabins can be quite a variety of sizes. At some point when they get too large, we might call them a lodge.

**Alie:** Oh! I hadn't thought about that.

**Dale:** The family lodge.

**Alie:** I wonder if there's a lodge-ology out there?

**Dale:** There you go.

**Alie:** I'm going to have to look into it.

**Dale:** Somebody's going to have to step into the void.

**Aside:** I found *one* record for lodgeology from 1961 and I wanted to tell you about it. It's from the University of Montana when the Student Union Gathering Center was called, "The Lodge" and 'lodgeology' was deemed by students, the most popular course in sport on campus.

One student said, "The most popular phases of the Lodgeology course are Smoking 101 and Advanced Time Killing 201." Which I suppose nowadays, I guess would be upgraded to Introduction to Vaping. Perhaps extra credit; Fixing the Cultural and Climatological Mess We Have Inherited. Not to get too dark. Anyway enough of lodges, where are cabins?

**Alie:** Now in terms of the culture of cabins in this part of the country, because there are more lakes, are there more cabins? Is the best place to be a cabinologist?

**Dale:** I think this is one of the premier places to be cabinologist because we really, really do have an incredible cabin culture here, particularly in the Twin Cities. And we go out to the lakes of Minnesota, and/or the lakes of Wisconsin, because although we may be better known for our lakes, Wisconsin actually has quite a number of them as well.

So, we probably have more cabin users per capita than any other part of the country. Part of that is when you're on the coast, for instance, where there certainly are getaway places, often when you have a place on the coast, it might be referred to as a cottage, a seaside cottage, rather than a cabin.

**Aside:** Cabins *plus* etymology! I'm dying right now! If you can hear this in my voice, I was, like, starry eyed floating in a cloud this entire interview. Dale Mulfinger is like the Beyoncé of cabin designers.

**Dale:** There are some names that cabin competes with. If you go into the Adirondacks or upper New England, you will come across the name 'camp', which is commonly used for what we here in the Midwest or further west might refer to as a cabin. The name 'camp' shows up again down in the bayous of Louisiana. I'm not quite sure of the origins of that, other than I think a lot of cabins in the early days in New England were created as a part of an ensemble of many structures and were part of what we might think of as a camp environment.

**Alie:** Like maybe there's a main lodge and then some outbuildings that are the camps?

**Dale:** Right. Also, the name cottage shows up, so you can take the same structure and slide it out of Minnesota... It might be a cabin in Minnesota, but head further east to Michigan it might be called a cottage, particularly if it's along Lake Michigan. Then if you hit the Adirondacks it'll be a camp. Then slide it all the way to the coast of Maine, it'll be back to being a cottage again.

**Alie:** What are some of your favorite styles of cabin; A-frame, log cabin, modern?

**Dale:** All of the above. [applause]

**Alie:** All of the above!

**Dale:** I really am fascinated by the variety. No one singular thing stands out. I'm as fascinated with A-framed, or a log cabin, or a very contemporary structure, or one made of containers. They all interest me and I love designing all of them. So, it's not just a matter of recording what others have done but, also being faced with the challenge of design and trying to determine with my clients what seems most applicable for them in their situation.

**Aside:** So, he likes to freestyle as well as hark back to traditional designs of yore. Speaking of history, Dale grew up on a dairy farm, and according to a 2013 article in the *Star Tribune*, he had said about dairy farming, that when he was a kid and his blue-ribbon yearling died, he knew that he didn't want to be a farmer. But he was great at drafting, so he enrolled in the Institute of Technology at the University of Minnesota in a time when you had to be really good at rulers, and pencils, and precision. There was no Command+Z! [*"There's no undo button."*]

**Alie:** And getting to your design career, when did you start in architecture? When did you know that you were an architect?

**Dale:** I went to the university wondering what I might be doing, but I had excelled in drafting in high school, so I started in architecture at the university and gradually got to enjoy it more and more and, did quite well by the time I was exiting school. Not so well when I started. And then I worked for the first decade actually in urban design, nothing to do with small little buildings but rather city planning and large-scale structures.

And then probably about 10 years into my working career, I started gradually to work on smaller things. When I got to houses I really enjoyed being invited to dinner after you're all done. Out of that came a firm, which is now *SALA*, and an initial partner, Sarah Susanka, who wrote a book called, *The Not So Big House*, which made her kind of famous. We had a pretty swift start as a career with her and I creating a firm that does houses. And out of houses came the possibility of doing a second home for someone, which then led me to cabinworld.

**Aside:** Quick side note, I was wondering, how many people have a second home? It's just so hard to get just one. I looked it up and according 2017 stats, 9.3 million Americans live in a house that has a second home. So, a very slim percentage. But I did some digging and one figure estimated that folks in the state of Minnesota are 3 times more likely to own a cabin or a lake house than the rest of Americans. But the average age of cabin ownership is 68.

And no one's quite sure what's going to happen. Are Millennials going to take over the cabins? Are they going to sell them? Who knows. But Minnesota is the land of 10,000 lakes. That's a lot of shoreline to cozy up to, so Dale is in the right place. What about the rest of the country or world?

**Alie:** Are there places in the country where it's more common to have a house that you would go enjoy the seasons in? Is there something maybe about the cold weather that you really appreciate the snow? Or really appreciate the spring or summer?

**Dale:** Well, I think people who appreciate being outdoors in the snow, whether you're cross-country skiing, downhill skiing, or ice skating, or whatever, those people enjoy their cabin year-round. Or if they just enjoy sitting by the fire, reading a book when the snow was falling outside. Obviously if you have a cabin in the Rocky Mountains, it might be because you really enjoy skiing and therefore you've chosen a location next to Big Sky or something like that.

Here in the Midwest people seem to vary, either they are truly just one-season cabin goers or they actually enjoy going year-round as I do. I love the solitude of winter and some cross-country skiing, even though it might be -20° outside.

**Alie:** I don't know how... I literally don't know how you survive. As a Californian, the amount of layers I would need! If I could grow a beard though, I think I would be better.

**Dale:** Yes, that's helpful. [*male voice: "Oh, come on, I'm Italian!"*]

**Alie:** Do you have a favorite cabin that you've designed? I know it's got to be so hard, but something that was really memorable or was a challenge?

**Dale:** The next one.

**Alie:** The next one! [*swoons*]

**Dale:** I think the one that I did up on Madeline Island where people wanted a unique retreat. One of the couples said, "I want something quite unique for me." I designed 100-foot-long wall with a portal in the middle, and after you pass through the wall you step into a glass pavilion and look out over Lake Superior. Then if you want to go into a private space you walk down inside the wall to a blue box where you have a private sleeping area. It's a very unconventional structure and probably still stands out in my repertoire of work as a very unique structure.

It's all about the notion of a retreat, having a phenomenal place of retreat that leaves the 'other world' behind. I think that's one of the things that when you say, "Can a cabin be a year-round house?" One of the challenges of that is, cabins often work best when they are the other world, when they're not the everyday.

**Alie:** They're kind of like the mistress of the house world.

**Dale:** I guess so. Yes. [*Marge Simpson: "Sweetie, it's a side piece."*]

**Alie:** Does a cabin have to have a fireplace?

**Dale:** No, it doesn't. In fact, wood stoves can be an economical way of having fire without having the cost of a fireplace. And wood stoves are very effective in terms of really heating space. Do they do they have to have fire? No. We've done cabins without any fire in them, and that helps with the insurance rates if you don't have it.

**Alie:** And what do you think about in the last few years, the tiny house movement and tinier spaces? Where do you feel like cabins fit in with that or is it a completely different thing?

**Dale:** Well there's an overlap between tiny houses and cabins. I think the tiny house movement is a fleeting movement and it'll disappear as fast as it arrived, because I think resale on it is challenging. So, much like dome homes and other fads that we jump into every once while, I think this one will leave.

But I think cabins will remain, and having a tiny structure be a cabin will still be out there. I think tiny homes, as far as actually being one's home and living in it 365 days a year, it will be questionable whether people do that in the long haul, or whether it'll just be for 2 years of their life, or a segment of their life, and then they'll move on to whatever.

**Aside:** I will say, in researching tiny home living, a little abode tends to cost between \$20,000 to \$30,000 on average to build. And in looking this up, oh my god. I stumbled upon an article about a woman who built a 196 square-foot tiny house out of an old \$500 RV and

some up-cycled wood pallets, very resourceful. But then she adopted a Great Dane. A 150-pound Great Dane to live in it with her. Oh, then she got married and they had a kid.

I had to stop reading in the middle of this article and just pace the floor and do a meditation because, woman, what!?! So, sometimes life throws you curveballs in the form of quadruple the number of people living in a space that's the size of a kitchen.

Also, I asked Dale about this Danish concept that's all about cozy living all year round. But I had to ask my Swedish friend, Simone Giertz, aka the Gizmology episode Gizmologist, aka the host of, *Shitty Robots*. Also, she just turned her Tesla Model 3 into a truck and named it Truckla; it's glorious. I had to ask her how to pronounce this word that looks like 'higgy'. She helped me out. [*Simone's recording: "So it's pronounced hoo-geh. Hoo-geh."*]

**Alie:** I know that you have talked about cabins and hygge. I would love to know a little bit about that concept and how you think it relates to the feeling of a cabin. Not just the architecture, but the emotions of being in that kind of retreat.

**Dale:** Well, hygge comes from Scandinavia, and it's been common in Scandinavia to live in small space. They don't really need luxurious houses in Scandinavia, or haven't felt they've needed it. They have to find ways of using spaces that are effective and therefore the notion of hygge overlaps with the notion of cabins as we understand them.

How you use that space and how you'd not over decorate it, overfill it with too many things, I think there is some common overlap. I must confess that I'm rather new to the term hygge so I've been playing with it, if you will, and doing a little writing about it, but I'm probably not as well versed in that as others may be in this country.

**Alie:** Yeah, I came across it pretty recently myself. I have a friend who married a Norwegian woman and so their Instagram is just rife with hygge in the winter. I'm learning about what it is.

**Aside:** Just shout out here to the Lepidopterology episode's butterfly expert, Phil Torres, and his charming, kind, new bride, Silja Danielsen. Just get all up in their Instagrams for some breezy summer living, some really high-quality cozy winteriness. They've got it on lock. Speaking of:

**Alie:** How do you feel that social media culture or Instagram culture has, maybe, changed the way we appreciate these remote buildings, or structures, or retreats?

**Dale:** One big difference is that we now can rent structures everywhere. And part of that is made accessible through social media. So we can now not just have our own cabin but we can rent anybody and everybody else's cabin, almost anywhere in the world. And I think that's really changed things. And then we can immediately share that experience with an innumerable number of people. You know, those are probably the big things that have changed through the media as we understand it today.

**Alie:** Are you okay with that? With cabin sharing?

**Dale:** Absolutely. In fact, I think one of the phenomena about cabins is that we feel much more comfortable with sharing our cabin with others than we do our home. We're less likely to offer up our home as a place for strangers to stay in. Whereas cabins traditionally were places where, maybe we weren't accommodating strangers, but we were to accommodating Uncle Harry and Cousin Beth, and the colleague we work with. We've often shared a cabin with diverse people.

**Alie:** Do you have any memories of being in a cabin that are some of your favorites?

**Dale:** Well I think snow falling, and sitting quietly reading a book with the fire crackling, and my wife's good cooking smells in the background, is probably one of my best experiences. Or looking out the window and seeing the 5 or 6 deer that are eating the corn I just set out there. Those are some of the best.

I've had an opportunity to gather larger family groups together. Not necessarily in my cabin, because my cabin was a bit too small for that. But through the borrowing of friend's cabins or renting a friend's cabin, I've been able to gather, say, 16 of my wife's family members together and that made for a special occasion.

**Aside:** Quick aside: I made you a list of things you can do in a cabin this summer:

- Play dominoes
- Read a book
- Gossip
- Ask older people important questions about their lives
- Carve spoons
- Learn to needle point
- Roast marshmallows
- Write a list of all the things you want to do in your life
- Make your friends all tell stories about how they met each other
- Enjoy a poem
- Bake a pie
- Sip coffee out of one of those metal enamel mugs that they sell in camping stores
- Write a short story
- Learn to fry a fish
- Nap
- Throw your phone into the lake
- Quit your job
- Disappear from the internet
- Live off the land like that Walden Thoreau guy (Hope you don't get arrested.)
- Wish on a shooting star
- I also like playing Rummikub.

Okay, now let's say you want a taste of that cabin life but maybe a little closer. You could fashion a Garbin, which sounds like a portmanteau for garbage and bin, but it's actually a cabin you fashion in the rafters above a garage! A Garbin! Now, what about a straight up cabin your backyard? Is that okay?

**Dale:** I've certainly recorded cabins that occur in the backyard of somebody's home. Now, they might think of their cabin as a man cave to escape to, or her writing place that she can retreat to her writing, we call that a scriptorium.

**Alie:** Oh! I've heard it called a she-shed.

**Dale:** Yes, a she-shed. So, I think that's not uncommon and I've recorded a few of those in books I've done and in articles I've written.

**Alie:** Yeah, I guess a cabin is kind of like our childhood version of a fort but realized, and with plumbing.



**Dale:** Yes and some not with plumbing; an outhouse or whatever nearby. It might have some modicum of plumbing in and some way to heat it up, which may be our little fort when we were kids didn't have either of those.

**Alie:** Did you have a tree house or fort when you were growing up?

**Dale:** I grew on a farm and a fort might be a few bales of hay thrown together with a tarp over it, or something quite temporal. And there were lots of places to go build in the forest nearby and so yes, I had all kinds of inventions of space that were get always to hide out so I wouldn't have to do the chores.

**Alie:** I wonder if that's something about the mindset of a cabin, or a shed, or anything that we get out of our normal space, to go to a new space, do you think that makes people more creative? Do you think it frees us up emotionally?

**Dale:** I think when these environments are small enough, we imagine that we maybe we can have a hand in making them because it's not a super task to do that. I'm always amazed as I drive to my cabin and I pull up behind a pickup truck loaded with things that are going in someone's cabin. Whether it's a door they just pulled out of the church remodeling, or... and I'm often tailgating, and my wife is complaining that I'm too close to the back of the pickup truck, because I'm trying to figure out, "How in the heck are they going to put *that* thing in their cabin?"

So, I think cabins have some freedom of personal expression attached to them that makes them special places. So, you're inclined in a cabin to, say, cut the notches of the height of your children as they're growing, to score that in the door frame. You wouldn't do that in your house. That would be defacing your house in a way you wouldn't accept. But in a cabin, you're willing to do that.

**Aside:** See, cabins are casual. They are the 'taking off your pants as soon as you walk in the door' vibe of the architecture world. They allow us to dream of a life with fewer restrictions. Perhaps this is because there are fewer judgy neighbors in the middle of the woods maybe? I don't know.

**Alie:** Do you dream about cabins?

**Dale:** No, I don't. I don't dream very much about cabins. No, it's not a pervasive dream.

**Alie:** I was just wondering. I have this dream... Okay, tell me if you've ever had this, where you're in your house or in some house you live in, or whatever. And then you realize that there's a door, or a cabinet that you never noticed before, and then there's another room or another area that you never realized you've had. Have you ever had that dream?

**Dale:** No, but I think we should talk about your dream for a while. That's going to tell a lot about you. There's this place you're trying to escape to. You're just trying to escape to one of my cabins.

**Alie:** I know. I just really want a cabin.

**Aside:** Okay I looked this up. Virtually every decoding dream website seems to just plagiarize directly off each other verbatim, but apparently this is a really, really common dream. It means that we're discovering new abilities and strengths within ourselves! So let's say this is not flimflam and has some kind of psychological merit. I just decided to stare out the window for a minute and think, "What part of me am I neglecting, truly?" Like, let's get honest with myself.

The main thing that came to mind was just general grooming, but I think I also had these dreams more when I was working from home and just living in a studio apartment, which isn't quite, like, Great Dane, spouse, and baby level cramped but a little tight. Anyhoozle, dreams: windows to your gross soul. Speaking of windows:

**Alie:** When you are designing a cabin, do you decide to face the windows a certain way or is a different for--

**Dale:** Yes.

**Alie:** Oh! Where do the windows go?

**Dale:** That depends on the view. It depends on the sunlight. So if you told me, "Boy, I really like waking up in the morning with sun coming in where I'm going to have my morning coffee." Well, that's the east. Or there are trees over here that are going to block this kind of sun or whatever. So yes, window locations are extremely important. Here in the Midwest we are putting our cabins quite often on lakes, and I have to remind my clients that lakes are a horizontal view, not a vertical view.

So, we see a lot of people building cabins with very tall windows, climbing up under the roof. For what? To see more and more sky? Not to see more and more and more lake. So, horizontally-banding windows here is great. If I'm in the Rocky Mountains, their views are often very vertical looking up trying to catch the mountain peak, and then a different kind architecture evolves out of it.

**Alie:** So brilliant! That's so interesting to know. Anything in pop culture? Any cabins that you've loved in movies or TV? Or maybe, like, a cabin in the woods is always a scene for a horror setting.

[two male voices:]

"Oh, woah. It's a cabin in the woods. We need to go hide over in there."

"Nah man. I'm not going in there. It reminds me of a horror movie I once saw."

"What horror movie?"

"The one with the cabin in the woods!"

**Alie:** How do feel about how we see cabins?

**Dale:** Well often times I think cabins are connected to some of the horror films because they're out in that dark wilderness of heavy forest. Or they're next to a lake and somebody drowns or whatever. So, they are often attached to that genre of movie in a way.

Though there are certain exceptions to that where the cabin is seen as a tranquil place of escape. I don't think I have any singular movie that jumps out at me... *On Golden Pond*.

**Alie:** Yes, that was going to be what I mentioned!

**Aside:** Okay, so, *On Golden Pond*, is a classic 1981 Academy Award darling, starring Henry Fonda, Katherine Hepburn, and Jane Fonda. It involves a lot of sun shimmer on a lake, a lot of soft-focus filters, some difficult family relationships. There's some emotional reflections, some struggle, there's some trout, some growth. Also Katherine Hepburn wailing in ecstasy multiple times about loons. [*Ethel: "The loons. The loons! They are welcoming us back."*] I get it Kat loons are *tits!* Which yes, is an egregious Ornithology pun.

**Alie:** What about myths about cabins? What about something people misunderstand about cabins?

**Dale:** Well, I think they think they're not going to be high maintenance, but they do require levels of maintenance depending on what you want to be there when you show up. They're not inexpensive to make, even though you might think, "Well, shouldn't something primitive... and shouldn't I be able to find laborers in remote places that are going to work for dirt cheap?"

No, almost anywhere today you're going to pay pretty much the same price for a decent window and you're probably going to pay as much per hour for a craftsman in the woods as you would for a craftsman in the metropolitan area. So, yeah those are probably a few of the myths.

**Alie:** Is there an easiest type of cabin to make? Is it a log cabin? Is it a shed type of cabin? If someone is like, "I'm desperate for cabin, maybe don't have all the resources," What would you say is like an entry level setup?

**Dale:** Creating a cabin that only has four corners rather than 20 is a good start. Log construction is a possibility, and certainly homeowners that have educated themselves on how to do log construction have done it for themselves. It is a lot of unique attributes that people don't think about. It looks more obtainable than it is, and there's a lot to learn about the nature of what happens to a tree after you have to cut it down, how it shrinks in diameter not in length. So, you set log upon log upon log, they're all shrinking in diameter, which means your wall is starting to drop, and it will crush the top of the door or the top of the window if you haven't designed to take it.

So, there's a lot of nuance to log that people don't fully understand. You know a little kid might have a Lincoln Logs set and think, "Well that's a really easy way to build it," but it's probably much more complicated than just a standard frame wall made out two-by-fours.

**Alie:** Did you ever see that PBS... Dale Wernicke's *Cabin in the Woods*? [clip from documentary: "It was good to be back in the wilderness again, where everything seems at peace. I was alone, just me and the animals."]

**Aside:** Oh man. Oh, side note. Oops. I meant to say Dick Proenneke, not Dale Wernicke. Who's Dale Wernicke?? I don't even know. Where? What the hell, Ward? Also, thanks to Jarrett Sleeper's very on-brand gift of this DVD. set a few years ago. I own this in its entirety, and it's been a dream of mine to host a screening party with a mandatory flannel dress code, friends all just hanging out maybe silently whittling as we watch. But if you need some Dick Proenneke asap, a quick google will bring you to a YouTube clip of, *Alone in the Wilderness*, which by the way has 11 million views. So apparently, we are just united in our lust for solitude.

**Alie:** He's just filming himself on an 8mm, hand hewing. Just like, "Oh my god. How is he doing it?"

**Dale:** Yeah to actually do logs and do them well so they're going to last is a skill that you don't get overnight. And I've certainly known plenty of people who have done their own log cabin, but I've also known a lot of people who might have done their own log cabins and had a lot of problems with them later because they didn't really understand some of the nuances.

On the other hand, in many of the areas of cabin world there are log vendors who will do these things for you. They will build the log cabin at what they call their 'yard, which is where they work in their place. Then they dismantle the cabin and number the logs as

they're dismantling them, and then they reassemble it on your site. [*"Like a puzzle." "Exactly."*] So it may take them 5 months to make the cabin in their yard but then only 3 days to reassemble it on your site, and they'll bring it all there on a big truck.

**Alie:** Oh wow. Is there a cabin that you have on, like, a lifelong goal list? Like, you really want to see some cabin on a cliff in Iceland?

**Dale:** Not a singular cabin. I love the cabin experience. One of the fun things about being a cabinologist or someone who designs cabins is, I often get to stay in the cabins that I've created for others. So, it's pretty easy to ask a cabin owner for whom we've done a cabin to say, "Can I use this some weekend when you're not there?" I prefer the weekends when they're not there because I like bringing my wife along and she's one of my toughest critics, of course, as spouses will be.

I like waking up in the morning and saying, "How does this thing really work?" "Does the sun coming in where I thought it was going to come in? And how does it feel with the wind outside?" That's been a nice opportunity in this line of work.

**Alie:** Oh man.

**Aside:** Lesson: design things you want to use for yourself. It's sneaky and I like it.

**Alie:** Can I ask a couple of Patreon questions?

**Dale:** Sure.

**Alie:** Okay great.

**Dale:** That would be great.

**Aside:** Before we get to your Patreon-submitted questions, we'll take a break and chat about some sponsors that I really like. But before that, the sponsors make it possible to donate a portion of the ad proceeds to a charity of the ologist's choosing. This week Dale would like the episode to support the Clarence Wigington Fund at the American Institute of Architects of Minnesota. The Clarence Wigington Minority Architectural Scholarship recognizes the extraordinary professional and civic accomplishments of the first African American municipal architect in the United States. He was also the first licensed African American architect in Minnesota. So, the Clarence Wigington fund supports racial ethnic minority students who have a specific interest in pursuing professional architecture degrees.

Dale adds that it's really well administered, and it assigns mentors to each recipient. So, thank you Dale for that. There's a link to find out more about that organization in the show notes. That's the Clarence Wigington Fund at the AIA of Minnesota.

Some ads from sponsors of *Ologies*:

[*Ad Break*]

Okay, back to your questions. Now this first one, think about falling asleep, it's summer, you're hearing crickets, and maybe water lapping somewhere, maybe a window is open, a little breeze, but you're under one of those heavy quilts that your Aunt made in the late '80s out of old denim when she was going through a divorce. Okay.

**Alie:** Gingernut wants to know: Why do wood cabins seem like the coziest thing ever? What is it about wood that makes us feel cozy?

**Dale:** Well, I think wood has variety built into it. It also feels like it's connecting us to the forest that might be right around us. It might be a local wood. And it has a nice auditory characteristic. It's softening. It softens the sounds, whether the sound is crackling fire, or the quiet chatter of the friend you're with. And it's something pretty to look at, so it creates a nice background to a warm, welcoming environment.

**Aside:** Let's repeat that because it's like peak hygge cabinology vibes: [*repeats audio in a soft tone filter: It's softening, it softens the sounds, whether the sound is crackling fire, or the quiet chatter of the friend you're with.*]

**Alie:** Sydney Brown wants to know: Do cabin makers still utilize techniques that homesteaders used back in the day?

**Dale:** Somewhat, yes. Obviously, log building was common to homesteaders. I have a log cabin on my property that I use as a guest cabin and I'm quite certain that its original life was that of a settler of cabin. I don't think it actually was originally on my property. One of things about logs is you can dismantle a log cabin and reassemble in another location. And I think that happened with a lot of early settler cabins in this area.

In this area, there was a preponderance of wood available within arm's reach, practically, of where settlers were coming in. They often built log structures, and some of our earliest cabins that we associate with 'getting away to' kind of places, were the recreation or actually the reuse of those early settler cabins.

**Alie:** Oh, I didn't realize that.

**Aside:** Quick aside here, because for all of the history of North American settlers, there's also the history of Indigenous displacement, and resource exhaustion, and architecture borrowed from Native customs. So, that narrative is a huge part of American history and can't be ignored. I was doing a little more research, I just found a book through the University of Tennessee Press called, *Native American Log Cabins in the Southeast*, which was published, no joke, last week. I looked at the publication date I was like, "June 2019?? What??" Good timing there.

The book tracks the origins of Native American cabins and building traditions. They look at Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, and Catawba peoples. It also really interesting looks at elements introduced by Africans and African Americans. And the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture has relocated plantation cabins used as slave quarters for exhibit as a reminder of our country's not-too-distant history. Also, speaking of not-so-great things, where do you cabins factor in the apocalypse?

**Alie:** Mike Monikowski wants to know: What's the biggest obstacle of going off the grid if one wanted to do that?

**Dale:** Water. What's your access to water? If you're off grid, are you going to be willing to have, say, a hand well? Or somehow treat water that you're getting out of a lake or stream? So that's probably one of the bigger challenges. Toiletry, you know, what are you going to do about a bathroom? Are you going to accept having an outhouse?

And then bathing. A lot of people who are off grid, in other words they don't have power to run a well, therefore they're not going to have a bathroom in the same sense, and they will often use a sauna as a form of bathing.

**Aside:** PS, if you're in Minnesota or around a Finnish person don't you dare say 'sonna'. Just say 'sow-nah' and just say it with me. Sow-nah. You're going to feel like a fraud, but you will

avoid a lecture or correction. Also, many high fives to my sweet and gentle *Innovation Nation* producer, Stephanie Himango, for teaching me about how much Finns dig saunas in winter or summer. You just go sweat it out in this wooden box; you beat yourself with a birch branch and jump in a lake. I'm so into it!

**Dale:** So, they'll have a modicum of water available somehow, either they bring it with them, and that may be enough to take a steam sauna, and that's really their form of bathing and cleanliness.

**Alie:** Are there a lot of those up here?

**Dale:** Yes. There are a fair number of off-grid. We did one just recently, an off-grid cabin, and it has a sauna, and it has an outhouse, and it has a handpump well.

**Alie:** Oh, what a dream. And Jen Athanas wants to know: What ecofriendly upcycled or nontraditional materials, other than wood, can cabins be made out of? I guess we did actually cover this because we talked about containers.

**Dale:** They can be made out of many different things, from straw bales... and again these are probably best if they're materials that are readily available to that region or area. So, containers aren't the best product if you're building, say, high in a mountain cliff in Montana because they're heavy and you have to have a big crane to lift them into place. But you can buy them dirt cheap. For \$1,000 you can have a 20x8x8-foot container. Well, to get it on your property might cost you \$50,000. Then you need a welding torch to open up a window in it.

**Alie:** Right, that's a good point.

**Aside:** Hey! Hi! I looked this up for you, and you can buy a used 40-foot shipping container for less than the value of my 2007 Prius. Which if you must know, according to Kelly Blue Book is less than \$5,000 dollars. So soup up that container house! And maybe, \$20,000 dollars later, you can live in it. Just don't adopt a Great Dane. Or if you do, just don't tell me about it, because I can't handle that stress right now.

**Alie:** Carolyn Butler wants to know: Do you believe that cabins should A) be a minimalist escape from the modern world or B) that they can include most, if not all of the features of a modern home in a more compact form?

**Dale:** I think they can be either. It really has to do with your proclivity for what you want there, what you need there, what you feel comfortable with. They certainly can be primitive, particularly if you enjoy the out-of-doors and all you're really looking for is shelter that will warm you up a little bit and provide you a place to store a few articles and maybe some food. Then you really don't need much.

A lot of early cabins really are just that. That is to say, they are just shelter. It was kind of common to imagine, you're going to be outdoors to snip the beans, you're going to be outdoors to chop the wood, so you're going to be outdoors a lot. You're really just sleeping and maybe putting together a little bit of food indoors. But you might actually be doing a fair amount of the cooking outdoors.

That was common with settlers' houses. Settlers' houses were primitive shelter but a lot of their food prep and even some of the eating, all occurred out-of-doors. If you're going to be indoors a lot, if you're going to use it in the winter a lot, then you probably need a few more facilities. Maybe a bathroom and a proper kitchen.

**Aside:** What have we learned? Sauntering into the summer in tiny pants, armpits out, just check your crevices. Also, the next question is about offsetting the energy you use by way of generating renewable energy.

**Alie:** JCW wants to know: Is it financially worth it to build net zero energy cabins? Which I don't really know what that is, to be honest.

**Dale:** Well that depends on what kind of dollars you have up front. It's going to cost you more to build net zero, but think of it as money that you're putting in upfront that you'll save downline. But you have to have that money upfront available to you.

It depends on how you get your money as to whether or not you can afford to do the extra finances upfront, versus putting them into mortgages and paying them off over time. Yeah, if you have the money you can build net zero and save that those dollars downline.

**Alie:** Yeah, I guess just, what you have in your pockets.

**Dale:** I think it might have to do with your lifestyle. A lot of saving energy has to do with making sure that you have a hands-on approach to being a participant in how you use energy in your dwelling. You may think of it as passive energy, but maybe it's active in terms of your need for you to participate in that. Whether it's for you to chop the wood, or for you to manage the thermostat through your iPhone or whatever, in order for you to keep tabs on just how energy is performing in that structure.

**Alie:** So, you can't just build it and then let it do all the work. You have to be active.

**Dale:** It can do some of that work, like the extra insulation you put on, like putting on a warm coat. You can leave it on and all you have to is button it up. Some of the needs you have for energy performance such as for solar panels that have battery storage, those do require maintenance.

**Alie:** Okay.

**Aside:** Just a little heads up, your GrandPodDad sent me an article a few days ago about an Irish team of researchers who are using carbon nanotubes in batteries to increase energy storage capacity by 2.5 times. Everyone is jazzed as hell about this. This is a huge, major leap. Hell yeah nanotechnologist, Valaria Nicolosi, and chemical physicist, Jonathan Coleman, for working on that. We all want better batteries. I owe you a margarita in a mug or perfectly toasted marshmallow for that work.

**Alie:** I think we covered a lot of things already. So, I'll ask the last two question I always ask. What is the most annoying thing about your job?

**Dale:** I have to do a lot of driving.

**Alie:** Oh!

**Dale:** I enjoy driving, but it is a lot of driving. So I put a fair amount of miles on my car. And I certainly know the Midwest extremely well because of all that driving. So, sometimes having to drive four hours or five hours to a cabin site. And I never want to design anything where I don't see the land. People bring me pictures and say, "Oh we don't want to pay for you to go all that distance." Sorry. The land talks to me more than you, the owner. The land tells me a lot about what it is I need to do here. So I always want to go see land.

**Alie:** Do you listen to audiobooks?

**Dale:** I listen to local radio stations a lot. A lot of public radio in various locales, and even though I would consider myself a liberal politically, the one and only time I listen to conservative talk radio is when I'm driving. And I like to hear what the other side is talking about and how they say it, whereas I'm not likely to listen to that at work or in my home.

**Alie:** When you get to your cabin, then, I guess you can decompress if it has been upsetting to you, right?

**Dale:** That's right.

**Alie:** What is your favorite thing about cabins or about what you do?

**Dale:** Well I really enjoy the act of creating something out of nothing. Standing in a piece of land, whether it's in the Rocky Mountains, or in New England, or here in the Midwest, using only one's imagination while you're standing there trying to figure out, "How should I create this thing?" Standing there just daydreaming about it, or doodling, or pacing off saying, "Well, it could be in this direction, can be about this big, and I need to borrow a ladder and climb up this tree so I can see what the view's like at the second floor."

That to me is the most fun part, that very initial, as I say, going from nothing to something in one's imagination. And then trying to record it on a sketchbook or something so that you can start to manipulate that idea when you get back to your office. Or sometimes sitting at the local coffee shop not far from the cabin and doing all one's doodles, recording what you were thinking about when you were on the land. I'm more likely to do that, to record it quickly before I even get back to my home or office.

**Alie:** Do you give the cabin owners those sketches?

**Dale:** Sometimes. I have nothing against giving it to them. I sometimes forget about giving it to them, but most of them certainly appreciate when you do. And then fairly early on we make little cardboard models, and many of my cabin owners now have those models sitting in their cabins somewhere.

**Alie:** I think it would be great to have that at your desk at work just so you have that to think of.

**Dale:** Yeah. We make a lot of models in our office and it's usually the designer themselves who makes the models. It's not like we are hiring, say, student interns, to make models. Our models are like our doodles. They're a form of our own artistic expression.

**Alie:** This has been such a dream, thank you so, so much. Your work is gorgeous.

**Dale:** I was wondering if you would like one of my books?

**Alie:** I would start crying! I would love it!

**Dale:** Well, it's all yours, if you want me to sign it, I'll do that too.

**Alie:** Duh. Yes! This is so exciting. Thank you so, so, so much. What a dream!

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So, get yourself in the presence of an expert and then ask smart people giddy, stupid questions all you want. And then maybe go in with some pals, save up for a night or two away, if you can. Or you can crash a friend's family reunion. If there are enough relatives, they may not even notice! That would happen at mine.

So, to learn more about Dale Mulfinger, go find his wonderful books. Just google 'cabinology'. It's going to lead you down a little sunny, leafy path, right to him. His architecture firm is SALA, and



they're on [Instagram](#) @SalaArchitects, and I'll link that in the show notes along with all the sponsor and donation links. There are more links up at [AlieWard.com/Ologies/Cabinology](#). We are @Ologies on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and I'm [@AlieWard](#) on [both](#). You can follow and say hi!

This week especially, I get to reunite with Teuthologist Sarah McAnulty, from the squid episode and Cheloniologist, aka seartle, expert, Dr. Camryn Allen, for a science trip to Hawaii with Atlas Obscura. So, you're going to find some fun posts this week, including some nighttime bobtail squid dives on my Instagram and on the *Ologies* Instagram, so do go there, if you please. I'm also, naturally, taking my recording equipment to hopefully get a few episodes in while I am there.

Thank you to Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch of the podcast *You Are That* for managing [OlogiesMerch.com](#), where you can get summer bathing suits with the *Ologies* logo on your butt, and t-shirts and stuff. Thank you to Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow for adminning the [Facebook](#) *Ologies* group. Thank you, Jarrett Sleeper, for supporting my love of cabins and for doing assistant editing on this. And to editor, the hearthstone, Steven Ray Morris, for stitching together all these sound clips every week. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music.

And now, if you listen through the credits you know I tell you a secret at the end. And this week's secret is, number one, I didn't have a secret. I was like, "ERG! I don't have a secret for this week!" But now I have one. So, I decided to record this in a different closet because I moved. So I am in this little closet with some recording equipment and some foam up on the wall in, like, not a permanent way. I was like, "This is gonna be great!" I start recording this and I'm sweating so hardcore right now this might not be a good idea. I don't know what I'm going to do. It's *very* warm in here. Please cross your fingers I find a better solution. Okay that is all. Go out, have fun, toast a marshmallow, tell some secrets, and have a good summer. I will be back next week with a new episode.

Okay Berbye!

*Transcribed by Kelli Brockington*

*Final touches by Kaydee Coast who has never been interested in camping, but now kinda wants to stay in a cabin on a lake. For like a month.*

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