

Maine Boats and Harbors
July 1997

A Cottage in the Truest Sense
by Ted Hugger

Living and building on a coastal island

For years, Maggie and Neil Newton dreamed of owning a cottage on the coast. One day, while motoring about Linekin Bay near Boothbay Harbor in their Boston Whaler Montauk, a "Lots for Sale" sign on a small, tree-shrouded island caught their eye. "I remember that the island was deserted when we tied up to the community dock that afternoon," Maggie Newton recalls. "We got out and walked around, and at one end, found a perfect little cove where we had a wonderful picnic." The island cast its spell upon the Newtons.

For days, the couple's phone calls to the number on the sign went unanswered. But the tiny, pine-covered paradise lingered in their minds. After some sleuthing, the Newton's finally located the owners of the property.

The lot they had picnicked on turned out to be the 1.4 acre site they eventually purchased. "It was fate, I guess, because shortly after our picnic, the owners took the 'For Sale' sign down because they thought it was tacky." Without the sign, the couple never would have spread their picnic blanket out on the beach of that tree-lined cove, purchased the land, or commissioned Portland architect Sam Van Dam to design their ideal cottage retreat.

Their decision to build on an island wasn't made lightly. "We were nervous about building and living on a island--we had some serious reservations," Newton explains. "We just didn't know how much of a hassle it would be. Living on an island is not for everyone," she points out. "A lot of people want to back their car right up to their camp door to unload their groceries. For me, I love the feeling that you get on an island--a little bit of isolation, yet we're in the center of the Boothbay Harbor region. Separate and apart so that we have that little bit of solitude," she explains, "but are just two minutes from the mainland."

Van Dam is proud of the fact that the Newton house is a cottage in the truest sense of the word. "Some people talk about building a cottage, but they end up building an embassy. We worked hard to make this cottage a compact, effective living space that

was flexible, so that each square foot really counted. That's really important when you build on an island because everything must come out on a boat."

The materials had to be kept simple so that they could be delivered to the island on a single barge, and kept small so they could be easily hauled up on shore to the building site. "It's very different to frame the house with columns and Douglas fir beams that two men can carry versus using a piece of steel that weighs a thousand pounds," Van Dam explains. "We started designing with the premise that things had to be portable. When you build on an island like this, you have to add 20 percent to the cost just because of the logistics--transporting materials and workers, and the fact that everything had to be done by hand."

But a true cottage, he says, is more than just shingles and traditional windows. Van Dam's early summers were spent in lake cottages in New Hampshire, a cottage on Great Diamond Island, and finally at his mother-in-law's cottage in Pemaquid. This background gave him an important regional perspective, and an understanding of Maine's unique climate. "For example, you're always dealing with southeast winds during the summer months," he explains. "You could build a traditional cottage with small windows and a huge deck to the southeast side and assume you'll be out there all of the time. But, it's not going to happen in Maine. If you don't have a leg of the building that goes to the east, you're not going to get protection from the southeast winds.

"A cottage should have a quality of space which is unlike a winter house," Van Dam adds, "not too large and rangy. It should be easy to open and close, and simple to take care of--for example, using exposed wood surfaces in the interior rather than dry wall that will degrade during the long Maine winter because of the moisture. It should feel like a seasonal dwelling--a summer dwelling."

One requirement the architect had to work within was that the cottage had to fit in with the other four houses on the island. It didn't have to look like the other houses, but it did have to feel like it belonged.

Van Dam insists on emphasizing a collaboration between architect, builder, and owner. The Newtons, in this case, had a clear vision of what they wanted. In fact, part of their vision was shaped by another cottage Van Dam had designed on Cushing Island several years earlier (See *Maine Boats and Harbors*, Oct./Nov. 93). "You don't need a lot of house if it's well designed," he says. "The house on Cushing Island is less than 1,500 square feet and this house is just 2,300 square feet. They both feel a lot larger than they are because we concentrated on developing effective open space."

The collaboration works because Van Dam places a premium on listening to his clients. Often, he must reach beyond what the client is saying to devise a plan that will fulfill their needs. “Van Dam is an artist as well as an architect,” say Newton, “and he’s easy to deal with. We never felt it was just his design--it was his design *for us*.”

“We’re not just listening to clients talk about how many rooms, or the shapes of their rooms, or their ideas about what they want the building to look like” Van Dam says. “We’re also trying to figure out how a family lives so we can design a home that will accommodate them.”

For example, Maggie Newton enjoys entertaining, so one requirement was designing an efficient kitchen that feels like it is part of the living space. “I love to cook and wanted a really nice kitchen where I didn’t have a traffic pattern through it,” Newton says. “So it’s a U-shaped--once I’m in it, I don’t have people tracking in and out. It’s open, so I can feel a part of the group while I’m cooking. Best of all, I can look out and see water in almost any direction.”

The ocean side of the Newton’s cottage is a tree-lined gorge looking south out onto the deep water. To help create the sense of space, Van Dam brought the out-of-doors indoors with a grand window arrangement. “It’s all glazed,” he says, “it’s literally a wall of windows, not a wall with windows in it.”

One of his favorite tricks is to design a floor plan so there is an unobstructed view across the longest diagonal in the building. While this building is small, you can sit in the dining area and look all the way to the porch for a distance of 60 feet, and then out through the surrounding trees to the rocky shore line.

“We spent a lot of time thinking about the entry sequence,” Van Dam remembers. “It’s an important part of the experience: walking up from the dock road, branching off to a wooded path, the view of the building--then you step in under the porch roof and enter a smaller vestibule which is part of the porch, and through the screen door into the entry space.”

And there, the open design strikes you; soaring 23 feet overhead, the second floor balcony opens onto the three bedrooms and bath. Off to the left is the kitchen, with the dining and living room stretching off in one large open space. A few steps ahead into the main part of the house, and the view stretches off to the water and trees, drawing you into the cottage. “While it may sound simplistic, that whole sense of entry--the sequence of how you walk into the house--is important and dramatic. It’s the

experience I strive to make as rich as possible, even if we have a limited budget,” Van Dam says.

The exposed frames in the ceiling add to the sense of spaciousness. “The contractor, Joe Caputo, did the framing in a way that deserves to be seen,” says Van Dam. “He did some post-and-beam joinery which adds to the quality of the place.” The timbers are Douglas fir, hemlock or spruce, and the interior finish framework is #2 pine, with wide pine boards for the floor and walls. A central fireplace provides the sole heat for this May-to-October coastal home.

While the building materials came out by a single barge, virtually all of the furnishings and appliances were brought out piece-by-piece in the family’s 17’ Boston Whaler. The move across the often windy channel was not without its moments of excitement. During a particularly rough trip, a load of copper piping slid off the boat, into the water, and, of course, sank like a stone. The water off the dock is 30 or 40 feet deep at high tide. Undaunted, the contractor went home, got his scuba gear and pulled everything off the bottom.

Most of the furnishings Newton and her son, Timothy, brought out with the Whaler. Chair by chair, bookcase by bookcase, bed by bed. It was a lot of work but it meant a lot to them, according to Newton.

“Moving to the island was fun, and it was certainly an adventure, too,” says Newton. “One time, when the builder was using the Whaler, I was rowing the 500 yards across to the island with a wicker sofa stretched across the bow of a small rowing boat. One of the tour boats motored by, and I could hear the tour guide up on the deck talking to the sightseers, saying, ‘Well that’s what folks have to do when they live on an island!’”

To help create the sense of space Van Dam brought the out-of-doors indoors with a grand window arrangement. One of his favorite tricks is to design a floor plan so there is an unobstructed view across the longest diagonal in the building.

Van Dam Architecture and Design
66 West Street
Portland, Maine 04102
207.775.0443
www.vandamdesign.com