

Maine Boats and Harbors
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Architectural Checkmate
by Ted Hugger

To Sam Van Dam, the business of designing and creating showpiece homes is like a very complex game of architectural chess. The game delights Van Dam, whose satisfaction comes from successfully planning his moves, overcoming expected and unexpected challenges as they arise, and watching his elaborate plans evolve to fruition. He has become one of Maine's grand masters of home building.

Take for example, the elegant home Van Dam recently completed in Yarmouth. The chess pieces in this project were many and varied. The site is a gracefully sloping finger of wooded land, carefully poking out into the sparkling waters of Casco Bay. For all its beauty, however, it is made up of unyielding rock ledge and burdened with a complicated set-back line that weaves a staggering path around the site's peninsula. Yet another piece are the owners: experienced home builders who came to the table with a well-defined set of objectives, but more importantly, and understanding of the limitations and constraints of undertaking such a project. Finally, there was Father Time: the project was to be completed--from the first conceptual meeting between owners and architect, to the planting of the last shrub--in less than 12 months.

Van Dam has been polishing his game of architectural chess on the rugged Maine coast since 1976. In 1988 he and friend and colleague Richard Renner formed Van Dam & Renner Architects, and have since earned a reputation for innovative, high quality residential home and commercial designs, as well as for designing the rehabilitation of historic structures throughout New England.

"Completely designing and building a home such as this in just one year isn't anything I've ever done before," Van Dam reflects. "We were commissioned in May of 1993 and the owners moved in April of 1994." When a job like this is fast-tracked, the architect and builder must continually anticipate and innovate as the process progresses. "It requires being able to anticipate where your options are going to be at various stages and then maintaining the flexibility to adapt to those options as they arise," he explains. "When we started, we had good plans, but by necessity, they weren't complete."

The owners had built two houses before, so they had a vision of what they wanted in terms of spaces, and a good understanding of the process. They were willing to trust Van Dam and builder William Hall (William Hall & Son of Yarmouth) to execute their dream, even though it was only partially laid out on paper before construction began.

“The challenge is working on a very fluid project, yet still being able to pull off the detail. The effort requires a great deal of trust and communication between owner, designer and builder,” says Van Dam. “Often, you start down a path, and all of a sudden, you realize I’ve got a detail problem here. Like a chess player, you must be continuously anticipating the detail on the project to keep it moving along.”

“This particular site,” says Van Dam, “presented a challenge in trying to capture the water views.” The site provides 270 degrees of water views--it’s a large piece of land, some 2.5 acres--but a site severely limited by required setbacks.” Van Dam’s charge was to nestle 4,200 square feet of living space unobtrusively onto the site, while capturing vistas of water in as many strategic locations as possible.

“The setbacks wiggle their way around the property,” he observes. “We couldn’t do a traditional New England house because we wouldn’t have been able to utilize the little peninsulas of land created by the setbacks, severely limiting the views.”

Van Dam used a series of New England barn forms with 45 degree roofs, attached to each other with flat-roofed connectors. “If you tried to connect the pieces with valleys and gables, it would be a mess,” says Van Dam. “The flat roof sections allow the rectangular sections to fit the site. The separate design units “allowed us to slip and slide various pieces to fit within the set-back perimeter, provide water views for the primary living spaces, and create enclosed outdoor areas.”

The owners are avid gardeners and enjoy their landscaping. The unique floor plan defines three, separate, distinct outdoor areas: an entry courtyard, a sunny living courtyard to the south with a deck, and a master bedroom courtyard shared by a dining room. Van Dam refers to the master bedroom courtyard as a woods garden.

Even with the flexibility this design allowed, it was a tight fit. The building touches the setback line seven times. The siting aspect of this property is one of the most successful moves Van Dam executed in this game of chess.

The owners didn’t want the house too tall, preferring a subtle, horizontal presentation. The execution is effective: looking at the house from the front, you simply don’t realize there are three bedrooms and two baths on the second floor. “This consideration is

extremely important with a structure this close to the water,” says Van Dam, “so that the house doesn’t create the jarring silhouette often seen in houses built along Maine’s rocky coastline.”

There was another unexpected benefit to the “sliding pieces” style of design. Many people today want open space, rather than distinct, enclosed dining and living room areas. Unfortunately, open floor plans sometimes create a cavernous feeling. To make this type of floor plan work, the architect must use a number of different devices--screens, they call them--to make the separations. Van Dam effectively used varying ceiling heights as screens in the Yarmouth house. The living room, kitchen, and library are all on the same floor level, yet standing in the library looking through the kitchen into the living room, the visual effect is of three distinct spaces. The library’s ceiling is a comfortable 11 feet. The kitchen has the lowest ceiling at eight feet and the living room then opens up with a 13-foot ceiling. “The result,” explains Van Dam, is that “you have one space in plan, but you really have three spaces defined by their ceiling heights”.

Van Dam’s use of level changes and partial walls between the offset spaces is particularly effective in eliminating that ‘open barn’ feeling of the typical open floor plan. You can actually see slices of view 80 feet across the floor plan through the library, kitchen, and living room. At the same time, there are enough distinctions of separation to create individual spaces of character. Van Dam also incorporated features that allow these relationships to be modified. For example, the sliding door between the library and the kitchen was custom built: it spans a 14-foot opening with four leaves that pull out of a pocket. These are true divided-light doors, each with 12 panes of glass. This attractive arrangement allows a reasonable amount of privacy in the library when closed, and creates an airy, continuous space with the breakfast area when open.

The Yarmouth house was built for a couple whose children have left the nest, but who want adequate room for them to return on occasion. The primary living area is on one level, including the master bedroom suite separated from the rest of the house by the central staircase. The suite includes a sauna and a large walk-in dressing area. Three bedrooms and two baths on the second level provide spacious accommodations for visiting family members, space that is totally away from the living path.

A stroll through and around the house reveals subtle detail--the fruit of an accomplished architect’s pencil. The combination of white cedar shingle siding and the vertically-oriented standing seam roof blend flawlessly. The roofing material is

lead-coated copper. Van Dam also specified lead-coated copper window and door trim to create an exterior with virtually zero maintenance. "It'll just be there forever," Van Dam promises.

From the formal dining room, descend three steps into the high-ceilinged living room. Divided from the kitchen by solid cherry cabinetry and bookcases custom-built by Max Zachau of Brunswick, the room suggests cozy evenings by the fire. Rich, quarter-sawn red oak floors throughout the house are accented by handsome cherry wood beams. The inviting, fire-placed library has an attached bath allowing the potential for converting it to an additional and convenient first-floor bedroom, should the need arise. There is a clear simplicity about this house--space is well-used, and the Maine outdoors seems to pour into the home.

Sam Van Dam will tell you that he works hard to please his clients, delivering a home that meets its owner's needs and, just as importantly, lives up to his own high standards of design, aesthetics and function. "While an architect will often succeed in pleasing others, it isn't often that he'll succeed in pleasing himself," he says. "I'm very fortunate in designing this home because I believe we've succeeded in pleasing both." And that, in the world of architecture and chess, is checkmate.

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