

Maine Boats and Harbors
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Little Diamond Retreat
by Park M. Morrison

Seaside cottage. The term alone evokes images of shingles, dormers and large, inviting porches. A wide expanse of lawn leading down to the water. Seagulls calling and gliding gracefully overhead. The smell of the seashore. English novelist Henry James said the two most beautiful words in the English language are “summer afternoon.” Could he have come to this conclusion relaxing in just such a space?

Portland architect Sam Van Dam knows the Maine cottage style well. He’s been designing homes on the Maine coast for nearly 20 years now. As is his custom, when he starts a new design project he not only takes the time to walk a building site but to explore the neighborhood as well. He studies the area’s “built history,” as he calls it, taking stock of the houses that already exist. He makes note of the design elements in the area, some of which may be blended into his design. The purpose, he explains, is to create a house that looks like it belongs.

This is not to say Van Dam is interested in reproducing period-piece architecture. Quite the contrary. While his exteriors often incorporate features of a time gone by, his interior design is typically a significant departure.

“Most cottages have individual rooms and tend to be dark inside” he says. “I think what people are looking for in a house is an exterior that relates to coastal buildings that have been here for 100 years, but have an interior that cuts loose from that. [The design] is not a slave to those small spaces. The question is how do you get those two qualities together.”

Van Dam was faced with this challenge during the design of a cottage on Little Diamond Island. In Casco Bay, just a mile from the Portland waterfront, Little Diamond has been a summer refuge for the better part of the 20th century. Most of the 60 or so houses that dot the island date from the 1920s. Some were designed and built by local craftsman--boat builders mostly. Others feature the distinctive style of John Calvin Stevens, well-known architect to the summer elite.

Two of Van Dam’s clients, a Portland couple, had always dreamed of owning a waterfront home. The trick was finding one that had all the elements they were looking

for. A Portland native, he was partial to the traditional lines of the island's coastal cottages. She, on the other hand, preferred the light and airy interiors akin to her South American roots. The contrast of the two needs was strong enough that building seemed their only option.

They selected a site on the south side of Little Diamond where the land slopes gently down to a sheer cliff then drops 30 feet to a rocky beach. The lot itself had been an open field and was relatively flat so a minimum of site work was necessary. "In terms of [the cottage's] orientation," says Van Dam, "the lot was simple because the sun and the view lined up."

It is apparent that simplicity was an integral part of the cottage's design. Visitors approach the house from its northerly side along the single country lane that circles the island. The dormered roof line, wide overhangs and tall, thin chimney do not suggest a modern design. And from this angle neither does it reveal its 3,400 square feet. It looks, as was intended, like a simple, early 20th century cottage.

Yet step inside and it is another experience entirely. The interior is a series of sunny, open shapes.

The building's footprint is a simple L-shape. One axis runs north-south, the other east-west. They are joined at the corner by the kitchen. Entering through the front door, the kitchen--defined by the open counter space--is to the left. To the right is the south-facing living room. Diagonally to the left is the dining room. A virtual wall of windows connects the three living areas, creating a feeling that you are still outside.

"Buildings that engage the landscape in one direction are better than buildings that are simple rectangles," explains Van Dam, adding that it is this L-shape that helps accommodate this. "This shape lets us take advantage of the several different views the site presents."

The kitchen--what Van Dam refers to as the command post--is at the center of the living and dining areas. "It's a great way to entertain," he says. "You can be preparing a meal and talk to anyone in either area." To add natural light to this north corner of the house an open space leads up through the eight-foot ceiling to a skylight on the back roof of the second floor. "It allows light to sift back into the potentially darkest part of the space. It also provides ventilation."

The long interior views produced by this layout--directly from the kitchen or diagonally between the kitchen or diagonally between the dining room and living room-- create a

strong sense of space. So too does the interior trim treated only with a wash of light stain. In combination they impart a bright, open feeling to this cottage.

In the living room the feeling is further enhanced by the 11-foot ceilings. Walls of six-by-four windows topped by a row of two-by-four foot windows enclose the three sides. A window seat runs the entire length below. With the windows open and a gentle breeze flowing, the effect, according to Van Dam, is like sitting on an open porch. "Porches are a regular cottage feature," he says. "The problem is they usually face toward the water view and, in this case, would have darkened the inside rooms." The solution was to place the porch on the side of the house, maintaining the cottage character without diminishing the light.

Extending off the east side of the dining room is a small screening room (Little Diamond-ese for TV room) that seconds as an extra guest quarters should the need arise. French doors open out onto the private deck, which is protected on two sides by the house's L-shape. Sitting here it's hard to believe you are on an inhabited island, much less minutes from a bustling city.

With a summer home on an island off the coast of Maine, Van Dam's clients planned on entertaining a lot of overnight visitors. Upstairs three bedrooms occupy the space above the kitchen, dining, and screening room, providing ample accommodations for family and friends. Each room has at least one large window with a water view. Explaining the oversize windows Van Dam said, "I like the change in scale you get from a large window in a small room. It makes the room feel bigger."

While technically on the second floor, the master bedroom is not on the same level as the other rooms. Being above the 11-foot living room, a small stairway leads up to the master suite. There was a conscious effort during the design stage to separate the master bedroom from the other bedrooms. Privacy was an issue and the change in level helped.

At the top of the stairs to the right is the master bedroom. A Jacuzzi room extends out beyond the side of the house over the porch. Two windows provide a relaxing "tub-level" view of nearby Peaks and Cushing islands.

The view is duplicated in the sleeping quarters, where the bed is positioned in the middle of the room against a built-in headboard/bookcase. A large bay window with a window seat faces south with narrower side windows facing east and west. "Bays are nice because they let you get 'outside' the building and see things from a different

perspective,” said Van Dam. “It’s nothing earth-shaking. But when you have this kind of view, all these things help.”

Yet another room--a loft, really--is above the master bedroom. Nicknamed the Crow’s Nest, it’s one of the owners’ favorite rooms. With large windows facing north and south and skylights facing east and west, there are views in every direction. This room was originally intended as office space. “The owner had planned to do work up there, but he’s never gotten to it,” Van Dam said with a laugh, adding, “There’s a hammock up there now.”

And perhaps that says the most about this design. From May to October, the owners spend most of their time here. The house really has changed their lives. They are island residents now with a winter home on the mainland. Because of its ranginess it provides a veritable moveable feast for family and friends. For them Henry James’ observation rings true. The most beautiful words for them, too, are now “summer afternoon.”

Before You Build

There is no question that building a house on an island is more expensive, more difficult and time-consuming than on the mainland. Workers and suppliers are beholden to boat schedules that may be further complicated by weather and other factors. “If you’re planning island work,” says Sam Van Dam, “you need to take the attitude that it will be done when it’s done.”

Van Dam recommends, however, a few tips for those contemplating an island getaway. First and foremost, is an experienced contractor. “On Little Diamond, we were fortunate to have Wright-Ryan Construction out of Portland. They’ve built a number of island houses. Their knowledge of what to expect no doubt averted some problems and saved some time.”

Of course a good contractor is ineffectual without a good set of plans. To that end, says Van Dam, it is the architect’s responsibility to provide the most detailed drawings possible. “Provide every bit of information because you can’t just hop in your car and drive to the site to resolve a problem. If you leave things loose, they get mired in a time problem.”

Tall rectangular window shapes lend a classical air to the entry of this shingle-style cottage in Portland’s Casco Bay.

A great transition area, the deep porch offers an imagination of uses--gardening shed, poetry corner, and breakfast nook.

The combination of long interior views, and trim treated with only a light wash of stain impart a bright open feel.

Diagonal sightlines inside the house contribute to a large, open feeling far greater than its 3,400 feet.

Natural light and wooded views complement the privacy of the upstairs bath.

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