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Cranberry Island  
by Scott Simons

This classic cottage on the Cranberry Isles was designed as a summer home for two professors and their extended family. “The owners wanted to be able to have all their children and grandchildren visit but not have them under foot,” says architect Sam Van Dam from Van Dam Architecture and Design in Portland. To accomplish this, Van Dam created a two-part house connected by a glass-enclosed porch so they could have their family visit while still maintaining their privacy and personal space.

The main house includes the living and dining rooms, kitchen, library, and master bedroom suite. The smaller of the connected cottages has sleeping quarters for the rest of the family. Many aspects of this house are worth noting, but the bay window in the living room caught my eye. It is thoughtfully designed, takes advantage of the qualities of its location, and is well tailored to the clients’ very specific needs.

But what are these needs? “My clients are voracious readers,” Van Dam explains. “The house has dramatic views to the north sweeping over Penobscot Bay to Mount Desert Island.” Books in hand, the owners dreamed of enjoying this view while they raced through their summer reading lists.

To create the ultimate reading environment, Van Dam designed a generous bay window seat facing the most dramatic island view. Windows were extended from the ceiling to the edge of the window seat, expanding the vista from the interior living spaces. These large, custom casement windows wrap around the corners of the bay window, projecting the room outside the bounds of the main house into the surrounding landscape. They are all operable and can be thrown open to allow the feel of the sea breezes and the smell of the salt air to penetrate the house.

To further enhance this readers’ paradise, Van Dam designed small seat backs perpendicular to the windows so the owners could lean back in pillowed comfort with their books and still see the water. Drawers are built in under the window seat, providing extra storage for family photo albums and collectibles. Hot-water radiators are cleverly concealed below the window seat, with slotted wooden grills allowing warm air to rise up along the windows on cool autumn days.

The interiors were designed to have the feel of a classic Maine cottage. Walls and ceilings are covered with a V-groove pine paneling coated with a thin whitewash to even out the wood tones. The floors are covered with quarter-sawn white oak with a medium stain. Over time these surfaces will weather to a warm patina, reminiscent of traditional downeast coastal homes. A brick fireplace anchors the center of the house, providing warmth and texture as well as thermal mass for absorbing and storing the sun's heat during cooler months.

The interior furnishings were designed by Margaret Morfit, who selected pieces to make the house feel as if it has been here for generations. H.L. Bunker Builders faithfully executed the details of construction. The result of all this art? Nothing less than a novel experience.

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