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Marvelous Mudrooms

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May 2007

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An Island of Elegance

Three Decades of Design Culminate
in a Strikingly Refined Home

REMARKABLE
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Photography Rob Karosis





Up and down Maine’s curving coast, oddly shaped peninsulas jut into the Atlantic like skinny, crooked fingers. The state is bristling with these rugged, long necks of land, and many of them make stunning—albeit challenging—locations to build a home.

“This kind of land is exactly why we’re working in Maine,” says architect Sam Van Dam of the Portland-based firm Van Dam Architecture and Design. He and his team recently completed a home on an island peninsula that preoccupied them for two-and-a-half years.

The “classic Maine island site,” as Van Dam calls it, is peppered with a mix of spruce, ash, maple, and fir trees, as well as patches of low-lying underbrush and a scattering of lichen-covered rocks. On three sides, the site drops off sharply and tumbles down to rocky, wave-licked shores. Near the center of the lot, a small meadow provides a break in the canopy of foliage, allowing warm light to pour in. Many architects would have simply plopped a home in the middle of the clearing, but Van Dam had other ideas.

Wanting to leave the organic landscape as untouched as possible, Van Dam decided to situate the home on the periphery of the meadow. He left the steep grade of the land intact, preserved as many trees as possible, and designed the home so that it would hover above the uneven ground on pilings. “In many ways,” says Van Dam, “this house was shaped by the trees and land around it.”

Even though the home hangs over the lip of a tremendous slope, it appears anchored to the ground with all the dignity of a sturdy old fishing pier. “We arranged it so that, when we were done, the house would appear as though it had just been dropped on the site,” Van Dam says.

Landscape architects accentuated the native ground cover around the house. Fieldstones were gathered from a blueberry meadow and used for pathways. Boulders weighing several tons each were brought from the same field and used to add texture

Pocket doors slide away at the entrance to the “bridge” that connects the home’s two distinct living spaces. Built-in bookcases flank the doorway and display a pair of contemporary Japanese vases by Isezaki Jun and Kishi Eiko.



along the path and to the surrounding landscape.

At the homeowner's request, Van Dam designed the house with two distinct living spaces. One section includes the kitchen, dining area, living room, and half-bath; the other, a master bedroom, full-bath, and dressing area. Van Dam linked these two distinct living spaces with a unique L-shaped "bridge." Surrounded by water on three sides, the wooded lot provides an abundance of privacy and allows the owners to forgo curtains on the home's many windows. Van Dam also ensured additional privacy by placing the guest quarters in a detached barn a few hundred feet away from the main house.

The home, Van Dam says, has one foot firmly rooted in Japanese architecture and the other in Scandinavian design. Van Dam is passionate about both traditions and excited about integrating the two. "There was a simple, spare approach with this project that just worked," says Van Dam.

Jay Fischer of Belfast's Cold Mountain Builders agrees. Fischer, who has collaborated with Van Dam many times over the years, says he appreciates the minimalism of the architect's material list used on this project. The list includes weathered granite, red-cedar shingles, and copper roofing on the home's exterior. From the inside, the house feels intimately joined to its natural environment by the fact that not a single square inch of drywall was used in the entire home. Instead, the walls and ceilings are Douglas fir, and the floors are hard, antique southern yellow pine.

"You yearn to have these kinds of materials at hand," says Fischer.

Another element that Fischer believes added to the project's success is its



Muted rays of sun bathe the dining-room table in soft light (above). What appears to be a shelf full of candles floating above the table is actually a set of wired lights.

This mushroom-based table, custom-made by Wentworth Allen in Kennebunk (right), was designed to avoid distracting from the view outside.





relatively small size. At roughly seventeen-hundred square feet, Fischer says that “the scale of the house is almost magical; it allows for a certain intimacy.” But, because of its many windows and high ceilings, that sense of intimacy never feels cramped.

“This is a house that opens up to the site around it,” Van Dam says. “There are several places where you can look through the entire house to the outside.” In fact, the extensive wall of glass along the living and dining rooms essentially disappears when two sets of custom-made, seven-by-nine-foot glass doors slide away.

Interior designer Karin Thomas says that she sought to emphasize the home’s relationship to the outdoors by using an earth-toned palette and steering clear of complex patterns and painted furniture. To keep her color range under control, Thomas had nearly all the tables, chairs, and rugs custom-made for the house. The furniture came from companies in upstate New York and Maine, including the Center for Furniture Craftmanship in Rockport. The rugs, many of them showing subtle hints of earthy green, were handmade in Nepal out of silk and wool.

The peninsula’s rocky landscape is brought into the kitchen with bright granite counters, which Thomas also used in the master bathroom. Throughout the home she played wood tones off of one another, such as setting a darkly stained bed frame against the lighter Douglas fir wall.

Van Dam says that a design project like this one only comes along every so often. After three decades as architect, he takes a special pride in the understated elegance of the peninsula home.

“When you’re young,” he says, “you try to put everything you know into every design hoping to make it unique. But I think we get better when we learn how to edit ourselves.”



Both the dining room/living room in the distance (top) and the bedroom in the foreground feature wide decks.

To the right of the home’s main deck (center), a dry streambed was created to flow under the home’s “bridge.”

In the distance (bottom), a ramp leads to the home’s front door. Landscapers added more mosses and ferns—the site’s primary indigenous ground cover.





A pair of China Trade gouache paintings hang in the master bedroom.

For privacy in a bathtub surrounded by windows on three sides, a shade threaded with bamboo is consistent with the home's reserved Asian influences. **MH+D**



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