

ON LOCATION

An East Hampton Renovation Fit for a Ship's Captain

The Amagansett, N.Y., cottage had to be rebuilt from the ground up. So one couple went all in with nautical style.



By Tim McKeough

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To get their ideal retreat in the Hamptons, Frank Selvaggi and Bill Shea didn't just renovate one house — they overhauled two. But that wasn't the original plan.

In 2015, the couple bought a small cottage in Amagansett, N.Y., for about \$1 million, on a street nestled amid sand dunes extending to the ocean. The house was small — less than 600 square feet — but they figured they didn't need very much space. And even if they had wanted to expand, local building regulations made it almost impossible.



Frank Selvaggi, left, and Bill Shea rebuilt a beach house in Amagansett, N.Y., with help from Kyle O'Donnell, the founder of Gramercy Design. Eric Striffler for The New York Times

The structure, however, was in desperate need of work, so they hired Kyle O'Donnell, the founder of the New York-based firm Gramercy Design, to rebuild it within the original footprint.

“There was no insulation. There was barely a foundation. The rafters were undersized for the roof,” Mr. O'Donnell said. “It was just a summer cottage, held up by not much. Everything had to be replaced.”

Mr. O'Donnell completed plans for the rebuild, but just as construction was about to start, the couple, now both 62, began having second thoughts. Mr. Shea, a freelance creative director, planned to visit the house only periodically. But Mr. Selvaggi, a founding partner at Altman, Greenfield & Selvaggi, a Manhattan accounting and business management firm with celebrity clients like Anne Hathaway and Timothée Chalamet, began dreaming about living in the Hamptons almost full-time in the summer.

"I'm pretty much parked out there for as long as I possibly can be," Mr. Selvaggi said, adding that his husband isn't quite as keen on spending endless days on the sand. "He's not as much of a beach guy as I am."



The exterior of the house was previously brown-stained board-and-batten, but Mr. O'Donnell clad the new structure in cedar shingles and outlined the windows in Farrow & Ball's Stone Blue, Mr. Selvaggi's favorite color. Matthew Placek

Still, he worried they might feel cramped in the little cottage with their dogs, Sherlock and Dodger. So it seemed like a stroke of luck when he struck up an opportune conversation with a neighbor at a street association meeting.

"We were just chatting, and I said, 'Oh, I love the street so much. It would be great if something larger came up,'" Mr. Selvaggi said. "He said, 'It's too bad you can't buy the house next to me. The owner is never there.'"

Intrigued, Mr. Selvaggi tracked down the home's owner, got in touch and discovered that the owner was receptive to selling. After some back and forth, Mr. Selvaggi and Mr. Shea struck a deal to buy the 1,150-square-foot house for about \$1.9 million in November 2016.

Their second house, it turned out, needed just as much work as the first, as it had received only minor updates over the years. But the idea of starting two construction projects simultaneously was daunting, so as construction proceeded on the first house, Mr. Selvaggi and Mr. Shea moved into the larger one without changing a thing.



The Digby sofa in the living room is a custom shape from Dune, and the vintage live-edge coffee table was found on 1stdibs. Concealed doors above the fireplace open to reveal the TV. Matthew Placek

By early 2018, the first house was complete. Rather than moving in, the couple sold it to Anthony Bonsignore, Mr. Selvaggi's business partner, for \$1.7 million, which Mr. Selvaggi said allowed the couple to break even.

Then they spent another summer in their larger, unrenovated cottage after the building permit was delayed, and finally began their second renovation in September 2019.

Much like the first project, this one involved basically rebuilding the house from scratch within the original footprint. But by adding dormers on the second floor, Mr. O'Donnell was able to boost the home's size to almost 1,350 square feet, making space for three reasonably sized bedrooms and two full bathrooms.

The design includes a new ground-floor terrace behind the house with a small pool and outdoor shower, a pair of terraces off the primary suite on the second floor, and a rooftop terrace overlooking the dunes.

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The primary bathroom is finished in azure hexagonal tile and white marble. The Empire freestanding bathtub is from Waterworks (from \$13,460). Matthew Placek

Inside, “the approach was to make it as colorful as possible, and as fun as possible,” Mr. O’Donnell said, adding that he wanted to make the rooms feel deeply comfortable using materials that could withstand wet and sandy feet.

Most of the flooring is bleached, wide-plank white oak. In the living room, he covered the ceiling with V-groove paneling and added a paneled detail to the walls, which he outlined in Stone Blue. “It’s kind of a nod to a ship captain’s house, or something you might see in older houses out there,” Mr. O’Donnell said.

In the kitchen, which he relocated to create space for more windows, he installed teak cabinets reminiscent of ones that might be found on a boat and added a countertop, backsplash and window trim in White Fantasy marble.

Upstairs, the primary bedroom has doors that open to terraces on two sides: one for sitting and relax; the other, equipped with an outdoor shower, for exercise. The workout terrace also connects to the primary bathroom, which is finished in azure hexagonal tile and white marble.

Construction was completed in June 2020, so Mr. Selvaggi and Mr. Shea didn’t miss a single summer at the beach. Including the furniture and interior finishes, Mr. Selvaggi estimated that the project cost about \$2 million.



A terrace behind the house includes space for outdoor dining and lounging, as well as an outdoor shower and a small pool. Matthew Placek

Now, after living through so many years of construction, they have no intention of moving anywhere else. “It’s great out here,” said Mr. Selvaggi, who can walk to the beach in less than a minute and loves catching up with neighbors over cocktails in the evening.

Maybe best of all, their new home has just the right amount of space to comfortably accommodate the couple, their dogs and guests, without requiring too much maintenance, he said: “It’s the perfect size for a beach house.”

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