

# Maine Home

JUNE 2017

## + DESIGN



## SQUARE FEAT

Humble materials & simple forms on  
Great Cranberry Island

**+** A SMALL & STYLISH SOLAR HOME IN YORK

## PROFILE | RUSS TYSON

BY SUSAN AXELROD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINA WNEK

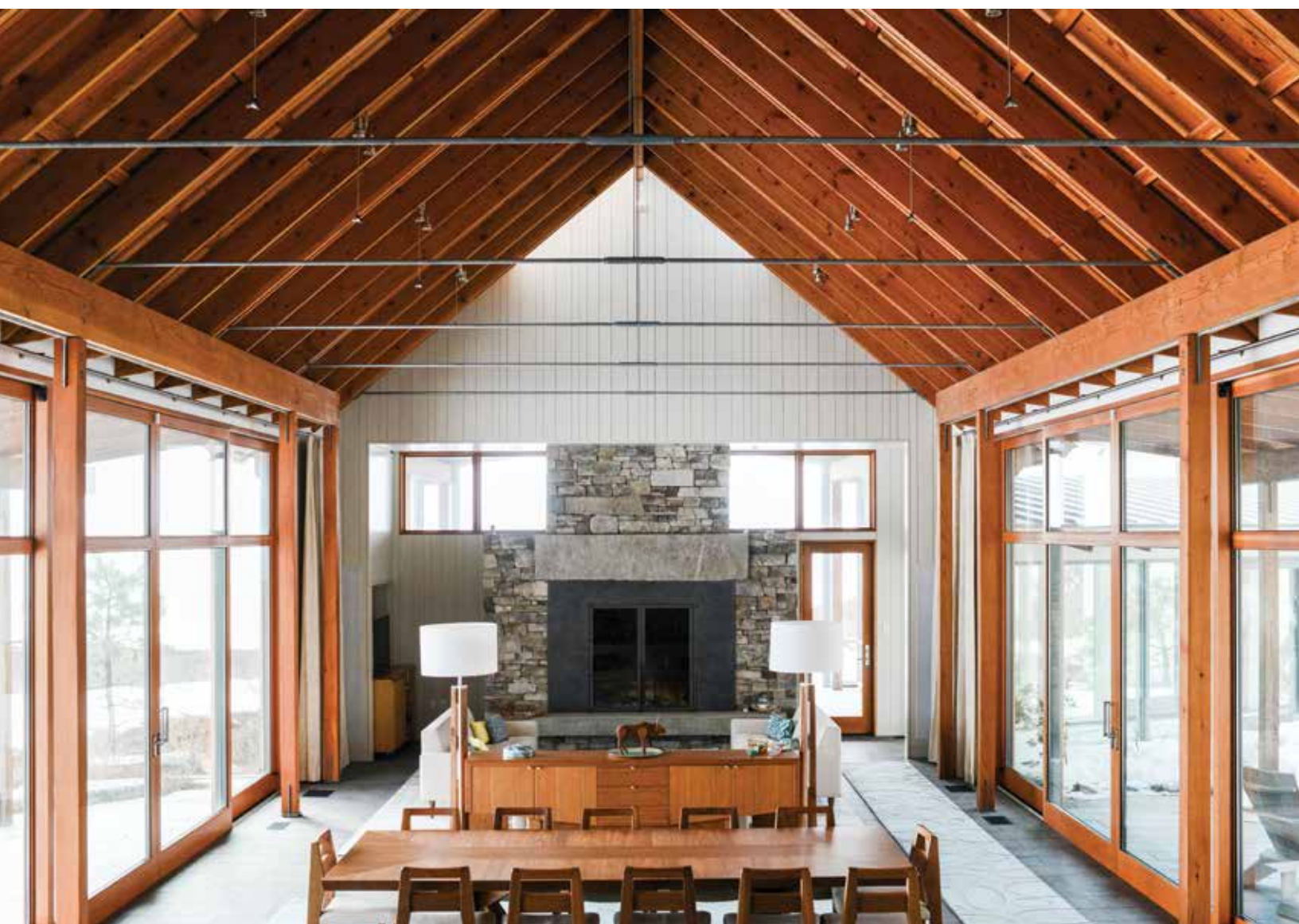
# PERSONAL PROJECTS

FOR ARCHITECT RUSS TYSON, PEOPLE ARE  
THE KEY ELEMENT OF HOME DESIGN



Russ Tyson is surrounded by eastern white cedar shingles on the porch of a beach cottage project in Scarborough.

The spacious great room of a Scarborough vacation home (opposite) that Tyson designed for a young family sits between an open, sunny space on one side and an intimate shaded courtyard on the other. Lift-and-slide glass panels open whole sections of wall to the outdoors.



**W**hen Russ Tyson talks about the Maine homes he has designed, he seems to spend as much time describing what's outside as what's inside. As a partner in the Portland firm Whitten Architects, Tyson designs houses that not only take advantage of elements such as an ocean or lake view but also seamlessly blend location and function. For a New York City family's vacation home, sited on a spectacular 36-acre waterfront property in Scarborough, Tyson included large lift-and-slide doors that open whole sections of wall, giving the couple and their young children plenty of access to the outdoors. But he also considered that the wife, a Manhattan native, was accustomed to more contained surroundings. On the western side of the house, a stone courtyard offers shelter from the prevailing winds and an intimate space for the family to gather. "It's a denser-built environment that maybe subconsciously gives some comfort," Tyson says of the courtyard. "It's the antithesis to the big, wide ocean view on the eastern side." Another distinctive

feature: the dormered lofts in each of the children's bedrooms and the owners' bedroom are cozy spaces set apart from the wide-open feel of the rest of the home. "This house wouldn't work for just anybody," says Tyson. "A big part of why I love doing what I do is the people I'm working with. It's very specific homes for very specific people on very specific sites. That's where I find my joy."

Raised in Florida and Ohio, Tyson became interested in architecture because he loved to draw; he still does, saying that it helps him to relax and focus. He studied architecture at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. "I fell in love with the design process, starting with a blank piece of paper and coming up with an idea," he says. His early work as an architect was as a member of a large commercial firm in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He continued at another large firm when he and his wife, Janel, a Freeport native he met at Andrews, moved to Maine in 2006. The couple and their children Paige, 12, and Rhett, 8, live in Brunswick and are



active in Brunswick's Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Janel is a teacher and the vice principal at Pine Tree Academy, which is associated with the church.

Less than a year after the Tysons moved to Maine, Portland architect Rob Whitten called. "It was like a dream come true," says Tyson, who had grown tired of commercial work. "I wanted to think about what's going to happen to a family as they grow in a home, and how the home will accommodate them," he says. Started by Whitten in 1986, Whitten Architects has a reputation for designing homes that, whether they are traditional in style or more modern, honor New England's well-established architectural forms. Like the Scarborough house, several homes in the firm's online portfolio are attenuated—meaning that instead of one single building, the home is made of up several connected structures—recalling the connected farm buildings common to rural Maine. "I think it helps with scale so that hopefully the buildings never feel so big and overwhelming that they're not approachable," Tyson says. "They're welcoming, and also when you keep it attenuated out like that, you can respond to site characteristics that you couldn't otherwise."

The home Tyson designed for Irwin Gross and Martha Fogler on a wooded lot in Brunswick includes an owners' bedroom wing and a separate screened porch. Over the course

of a year, Tyson and the couple met once a month. Gross and Fogler brought photos that they had been collecting; Tyson also visited them at their home in Bangor to ask what they liked and didn't like about it. The couple, both avid gardeners, wanted views out to the trees and to open, sunny garden areas. They were frustrated that, in Bangor, they couldn't see their gardens from the house. "I want a house that brings the outside inside," Gross told Tyson. The main living area of their new home has floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a terrace that will be intensively gardened. Attenuating the structures reinforces the connection both to the outdoors and between the different sections of the home, Tyson says. "They really enjoy the fact that from the main living space they can actually see other parts of the building. If one of them gets up early, they can sit in the kitchen and see the light come on when their spouse wakes up." The screened porch was originally planned for the main house, but Tyson and the couple recognized that they would have had to look through it to see the yard. "We call it the 'summer house' because it reminds me of the screened summer house on the Maine dairy farm where I grew up," Fogler says. Built ten steps from the kitchen door, it has a table and chairs for outdoor dining, something that was especially important to Gross. "The wood is Douglas fir, and it almost feels like one of those National



At the Scarborough vacation home, a wood pergola (opposite, left) connects the car barn to the homeowners' entryway and mudroom.

A Douglas fir lattice (opposite, right) in the owners' bedroom of the Scarborough vacation home provides some separation from the stairs that lead to a small loft overlooking the ocean, while still offering a connection between the two spaces as well as filtering light.

Tyson works on a site plan diagram (above) for a property on Lake Sunapee in New Hampshire. Whitten Architects produces these diagrams to show how their suggested design solutions relate to the sun, wind, and views specific to a client's property.

Park hotels out west," Fogler says. "The builder, Merrymeeting Builders, called it 'the jewelry box.' It's very, very pretty."

Making sure his clients understand his design is critical to the collaborative nature of his process, Tyson says. While Fogler was good at reading architectural plans, Gross had more difficulty picturing a three-dimensional structure from the one-dimensional drawing, so Tyson built him a model and brought it to the site before any construction on the house was begun. "It was fun because Irwin immediately got it," says Tyson. "When I get to the end of my life and think of the wonderful things I was privileged to participate in, this is one of them," says Fogler. "Having the opportunity to work with a professional person like Russ to build a dream home was such a lovely life experience."

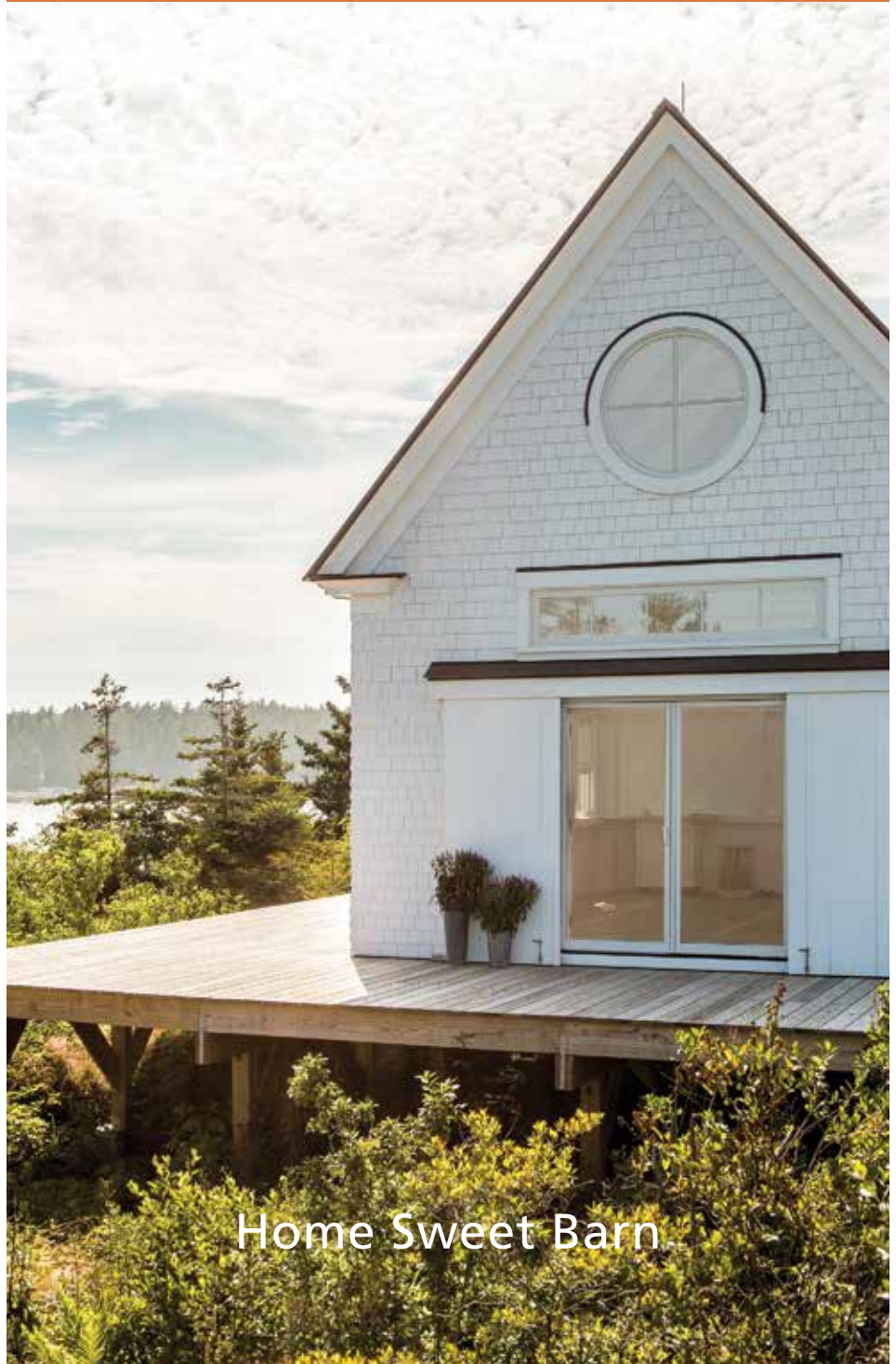
Thoughtful, focused, and kind, Tyson attributes his outlook to his Christian faith. "It's a big part of my life and how I treat people," he says. "Love God and love man; everything else is secondary to that." Designing fine homes that both shelter and nurture those who live in them is showing that love, indeed. **MH+D**

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