

Better Angels

Expert intervention guides three very different houses to their truest expression.

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AND CHERYL WEBER







Damariscotta River View Cottage

BOOTHBAY, MAINE

Formerly known as the neighborhood party house, this rambling cottage's classic proportions had been muddled by additions over the years. The ad hoc appendages felt especially unfortunate given the extraordinary natural setting. Anticipation builds as one approaches a vacation house high above a river, but here the arrival was anticlimactic, heralded by an ungainly garage. Even more unforgivable, a split-level bedroom addition on the south blocked light to the

main living spaces, and the house had little connection to the backyard. Whitten Architects' job was to restore clarity and dignity to this "odd soul of a home," says project architect Jessie Carroll, AIA.

"We see this a lot," she says. "We were given a pile of documents showing the additions over time. Each one took away from the original intent of the home and what made it special. It was clear which portions were working, and which ones weren't."

Whitten Architects was on a site search with their clients when they discovered this property with iconic Maine positioning. Overlooking a waterway plied by busy lobster boats, it has lovely views downriver and toward South Bristol village. Their clear-eyed makeover combined vernacular influences with an equally strong contemporary aesthetic to accommodate the long-term needs of their clients, a retired New York couple whose children visit often.



The Reshuffle

The additions had resulted in a trio of volumes—bedroom wing, oversized garage, and living core—and the first order of business was to remove the portions that didn't serve the new owners. First to go was the half-buried split-level wing that housed the main bedroom and two guest rooms below. This volume was replaced with a much smaller, transparent screened porch with a wood-burning fireplace—a bug-free zone that feeds off the dining and entertaining space. That move gave the living quarters more solar exposure and opened the view farther downriver.

With a sense of lightness partially restored, the architects worked with what they had, reassigning the existing

Opposite and this page: Documents of changes made over the years showed the architects how far this river cottage had strayed from its original purity. Especially egregious were a façade-marring garage arrangement and a bedroom addition that blocked natural light to the living room.





This page: There was no question the original living room/dining room had to come down, as windows and doors were just 2 inches taller than the client. With a raised top plate, new 8-foot windows open the room fully to light and views.

spaces to impose a more meaningful logic. The bedrooms found a new home in the former garage; behind it is a corner office facing the river (formerly a screened porch). In rehabbing the three large bays for guests, Jessie was able to give the front a major facelift and incorporate a proper entry. While the massing remained, white double-dipped cedar shingles replaced vertical board siding, and a crisp constellation of windows gives the building

a more welcoming presence. Clearing out the garage bays also created the opportunity for a proper entry hall with an open-tread stair and a big window at the far end. “We’re always looking for an opportunity to get a sight line through the house and let it breathe in all directions,” Jessie says. “The new entry corridor and stair gave a certain lightness to the house and a vertical element connecting to the second story.” Upstairs, formerly a media room, the

space over the garage now contains the primary bedroom, closet, and bath, and a balcony overlooking the view.

Any major renovation walks a line between autonomy and empathy for the original—making the most of what exists, balancing spatial and aesthetic needs against budget and opportunities for reuse. Here, though, there was no

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—Jessie Carroll, AIA

question that the existing kitchen/dining/living wing would come down. Not only did the windows and doors top out at 6 feet 6 inches, a mere 2 inches taller than the client, the structure would not have supported the cathedralized open span the architects drew. So they tore it down to the floor level, raising the top plate to achieve greater transparency with 8-foot windows. “The key was that the client was game for that process,” Jessie says. “When the construction crew started digging into the existing structure, we and our engineer were on call to address issues as they came up. The clients were living in London through most of the build and trusted our team.”

The extra height and glazing was worth the effort. During construction, the window openings had been closed in to keep the weather out, and builder Eric Marden remembers the day the plastic came off. “When we opened up and started putting windows in, there was a wow factor I hadn’t expected,” he says. “When you go from plans to reality, this one really takes advantage of the setting.”



This page: A pared-down color palette and flush detailing keep the focus on the views. The double-sided stucco fireplace contributes a sense of scale, while its large firebox opening and custom metal doors allow pass-through lines of sight.

Clean Sweep

Indeed, the living wing's subtle but cozy interior palette is meant to keep the focus on the outdoors. Its white walls are softened with wood flooring, mill-work, and collar ties, and flush detailing creates a soothing, timeless appeal that recognizes the New England penchant for simplicity. "There is no hardware on the kitchen cabinetry," Jessie says. "We didn't want it to look like a kitchen from the living room and dining room." Floor-to-ceiling cabinets open and fold back to expose more countertop space, lighting, and plug-in appliances. Behind one of the doors is a large pantry, laundry room, and mechanical room—"a windowless, hardworking room in the



middle of the house,” Jessie says. The one appliance not concealed is the kitchen’s centerpiece, a large, five-burner range and hood.

“We want them to feel like they can come here, kick back and relax, and put it all away,” she says. “And when you have guests, you want a showpiece that’s subtle and beautiful; the hardworking spaces are out of sight, out of mind.”

A new double-sided fireplace adds coziness and suggests a division in the large vaulted space. The architects used it to break down the room’s scale but rendered it with low-key detailing. The firebox is large to allow some transparency between the front and back of the room, and the entire column is finished in smooth stucco. A local metal fabricator made the fireplace doors, which echo the black window frames.

Pulling off the interior’s clean lines required extra on-site attention. “We can draw subtleties, but few contractors are good enough to pull it off,” Jessie says. “We were asking for a pretty rigorous piece of architecture, and they pulled it off using local craftsmen and resources, which is hugely impressive.”



The foyer stairway was certainly a significant ask. Its heavy timber treads and glass railing are fastened to a steel framework, and the sequence of raising it within an existing structure required close communication between the architects, engineer, and field crew. “We had stone steps going into the basement, and the rail had to be perfectly scribed going up to level two,” Jessie says. “They had to do a partial assembly be-



This page: Trimless, nickel-gap wall planking and a complicated custom stair insertion challenged the crew. However, they executed those details and the main suite’s streamlined features with meticulous precision.

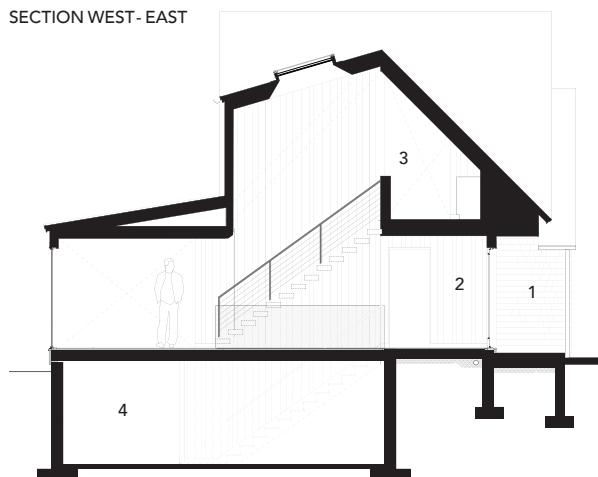
fore putting it in place; it was one of the last pieces to go in, and the sweat that it took is not apparent in the photo.”

Equally impressive was the sleight of hand required to erect the timber-framed screened porch. “The beams have mortise and tenon connections, but the hardware we used conceals the strong connection at these beams, enabling it to be very minimalist with just rods coming across as collar ties,” Eric says. “It was a



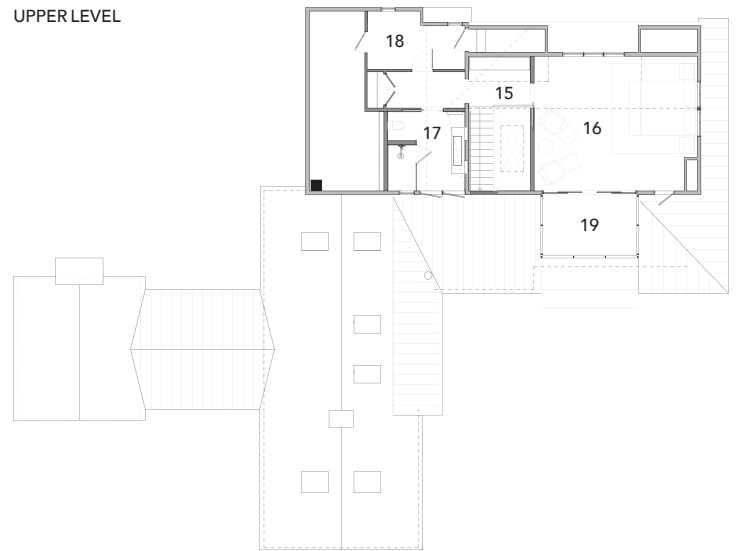


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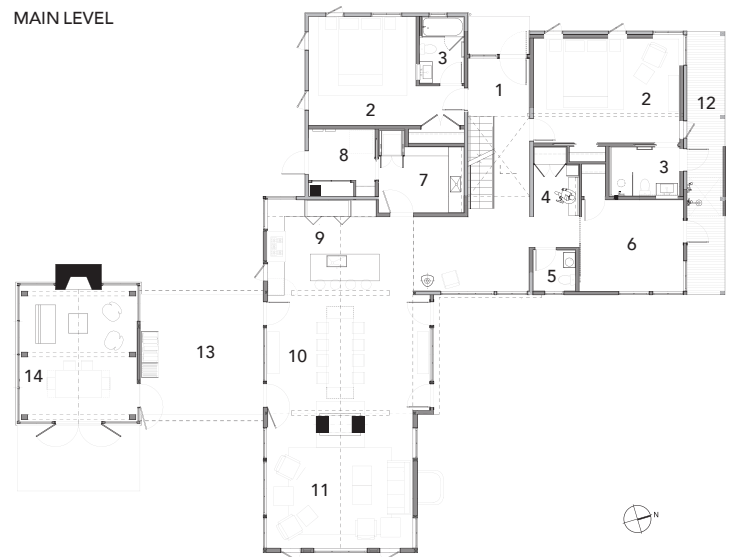


1. Entry Stoop | 2. Entry Hall | 3. Hall | 4. Basement

UPPER LEVEL



MAIN LEVEL



FLOOR PLAN | 1. Entry Hall | 2. Bedroom | 3. Bathroom | 4. Mudroom
5. Half Bath | 6. Office | 7. Pantry | 8. Mechanical | 9. Kitchen | 10. Dining
11. Living | 12. Side Porch | 13. Covered Terrace | 14. Screened Porch | 15. Hall
16. Main Bedroom | 17. Main Bathroom | 18. Main Closet | 19. Master Deck



The timber-framed screened porch celebrates natural materials but conceals the hefty joinery required to support the weighty structure. Beams are joined by mortise and tenon connections, but hardware is hidden and only slim collar ties catch the eye.

nice touch.” His crew also aced the entry hall’s trimless, nickel-gap wall plank-ing. “Here in coastal Maine, where it’s humid in summer and dry in winter, if you haven’t left some room on the back of those nickel-gap planks, they will cup,” he says.

It’s not just the house, but also the grounds that were renewed. The design team worked with a landscape architect to return the suburban lawn to a naturalized edge that enhances the architecture. Native plantings, ferns, and blueberry sod—a fruiting ground cover—pull the sight line out and the landscape up to the building. “They chose a landscape architect for a design that was just as important as the building itself,” Eric says. “The whole thing was a puzzle that came together so nicely.”

If remodeling is about discovering the hidden potential of a house, this Maine cottage is now living life to its fullest. Equally important, the clients were able to make the most of their investment in this special spot. “That’s what’s fun about renovations,” Jessie says. “The house knows what it wants to be. And with a renovation you’re giving it a whole lot more.”—*Cheryl Weber*

Damariscotta River View Cottage

Boothbay, Maine

ARCHITECT: Jessie Carroll, AIA, associate principal; Rob Whitten, AIA, principal, Whitten Architects, Portland, Maine

BUILDER: Marden Builders, Boothbay Harbor, Maine

INTERIOR DESIGNER: Krista Stokes, Kennebunkport, Maine

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Albert Putnam Associates, Brunswick, Maine

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Richardson & Associates, Saco, Maine

MILLWORK: Linekin Bay Woodworkers, Pemaquid, Maine

PROJECT SIZE: 3,242 square feet

SITE SIZE: 1.73 acres

CONSTRUCTION COST: \$490 per square foot

PHOTOGRAPHY: Trent Bell Photography

KEY PRODUCTS

CLADDING: Maibec Shingle

COOKTOP/RANGE: Wolf

DISHWASHER: Miele

DOOR HARDWARE: Emtek

DOORS: Marvin

FAUCETS: Kohler

INSULATION: Henry Blueskin

LIGHTING: WAC, Artemide, Robern, Timothy Oulton

PAINTS/STAINS: Benjamin Moore

ROOFING: CertainTeed

SCREENS: Screenshot

SIDING: Maibec

SINKS: Julien, Lacava, Duravit

SKYLIGHTS: VELUX

TOILETS: TOTO

WASHER/DRYER: Electrolux

WINDOWS: Marvin

WINE REFRIGERATOR: Sub-Zero