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THE INTIMATE DECK off the master bedroom is just one of several outdoor spaces with wooded views of Penobscot Bay. In a nod to the nautical, a ramp (FACING PAGE) that recalls a ship's gangway leads to the entrance.



# TREE HOUSE

ON AN ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF MAINE, ARCHITECT SAM W. VAN DAM DESIGNED A WOODLAND AERIE WITH OCEAN VIEWS



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**It's an idyllic escape:** 11 acres of lush woods, a private peninsula on an island in Maine's Penobscot Bay. Its owners, avid sailors, initially enjoyed the view from a docked sailboat, but soon the allure of a year-round home drew them to land.

"We thought to put the house site as close to the water as we could," says one of the homeowners about their original plan for the property. "We moved it back, and it became a tree house... [It] takes much better advantage of the property. It preserves the meadow and opens up a more dramatic view."

The house is nestled into a wooded cliff, giving the illusion that it is floating among the evergreens, yet a passing boater would be hard pressed to catch a glimpse of it. Positioning the house on the cliff was the clear choice in the restricted setting, because it takes advantage of the hillside without disturbing the meadow of fescue and fern. "We



**THE WEATHERED MAINE** granite fireplace anchors the open living space and provides an earthy balance to the rich Douglas fir on the walls and ceiling. Japanese-inspired 28-feet-long-by-9-feet-high sliding doors open to the meadow and main deck, creating the indoor-outdoor connection the homeowners craved.

tried to preserve the most level and beautiful part of the site and backed the building off of that," says architect Sam W. Van Dam, of Van Dam Architecture and Design in Portland, Maine, who designed the retreat.

Van Dam organized the 1,691-square-foot one-bedroom house in an L shape. It is level to the meadow on the east, which optimized outdoor living, and is perched amid the trees on the west to capture the views and convey the sensation of treetop living. Sitting on wooden

stilts rather than a concrete foundation, the house affords the grounded yet airy feel the owners desired. A window-lined angular hallway separates the main living space from the master suite and features a small corner work space that overlooks the water.

"Being up in the air looking down at the bay is a pretty powerful experience," says Van Dam. The L-shaped floor plan was designed to save trees. "We marked the location of every tree over 4 inches [in diameter], and then I worked backward to pick those in the best shape and most beautiful and made sure we worked between them. It was a close-fitting game."

Maneuvering around the evergreens was only one aspect of the extensive preservation efforts, which landscape architect Stephen Mohr of Mohr & Seredin in Portland worked on for a year leading up to the build-out. Protecting the site during construction was essential for the homeowners, so Mohr improved the stability of the trees by fertilizing, treating for insect infestation, and irrigating. When the building began, he also had root-protection measures in place.

The home, in turn, embraces its carefully preserved surroundings with living spaces that spill out through sliding doors onto two decks of Brazilian wood, one a spacious expanse off the living area, the other a more intimate escape off the bedroom. Large windows, many floor-to-ceiling, frame the diverse views. And while the overall design, inspired by Japanese and Scandinavian architecture, does not mirror the regional vernacular, it incorporates site-appropriate materials and New England touches.

"We like the look of Japanese architecture, and it was consistent with the notion of building an elevated home," says one of the homeowners. "The whole thing seemed to fit together."



Still, they wanted the house to reflect its location and chose red cedar shingles to create a rustic, natural aesthetic. A ramp leading to the front door adds a nautical touch to an exterior otherwise marked by foreign influence. The low-pitched roof and choice of well-aging materials, like copper, were a nod to Scandinavian influences, while the design of the windows and sliding doors was based on Japanese shoji screens.

Rich, vertical-grade Douglas fir, cut in planks that are nearly 6 inches wide, blankets the ceiling and walls, while recycled Southern pine lines the floors. The combination of woods introduced a natural warmth to the space, and the all-wood backdrop served as a perfect base for a network of



**MORNING SUN BEAMS** through the floor-to-ceiling sliding doors in the master bedroom. "I wanted the view from the bed to be spectacular," says architect Sam W. Van Dam of framing the water view. The adjacent master bath (FACING PAGE, TOP) has the opposite view to the meadow and main deck. Built-in bedside tables (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) epitomize an economy of space Van Dam incorporated in his boatlike design.



built-ins, a feature that plays to an economy of space prevalent in boat design, and a Van Dam signature.

"Because they wanted a house made of wood," says Van Dam, "it was important for us to design the cabinets in a way that was a part of the whole interior system, so it is all of one piece. The whole house is like a cabinet."

The delicacy and intricacy of the joinery and details, not only of the built-ins but also of the walls themselves, took contractor Jay Fischer and Cold Mountain Builders of Belfast, Maine, five months to complete.

Interior designer Karin Thomas had much of the furniture custom-built locally to further showcase Maine's tradition of fine craftsmanship. Thomas chose wood, stone, and textured fabrics in indigenous hues as

the core of her design. "The choice of colors, materials, and furniture had to reflect the outdoors; [it] is visible from every angle in the house," says Thomas, whose eponymous firm is in Camden, Maine. "The furniture selected had to be quiet and in harmony with the outside. It was very important that it was mellow."

Rough-cut weathered Maine granite gives the fireplace, as well as the entry floor, an earthy feel. Clean, low furniture lines prevent the space from feeling cluttered and "allow the eye to travel past the furniture" to the setting beyond, says Thomas. To strike the precise balance of color and texture, she designed all the carpets, which were then hand-made in Nepal from Tibetan wool.

Views aside, the restrained design incorporates more subtle visual

**NESTLED AMONG** the trees along a walking trail, one of the many that weave through the 11-acre site, is an understated sitting area. Just steps from the house, it overlooks the dock where the owners are about to land their sailboat.

experiences, such as a 4-foot change of ceiling height between living space and hallway. "When you have a small house, anything you can do to provide a different visual experience, the better off you are," says Van Dam. "Those dynamic changes give an interesting feel to the building, which fits the dynamic surroundings."

The property — lined with walking trails and private beaches — originally enticed the homeowners as a summer escape, but with the addition of their one-bedroom house, as well as a guest house and two more buildings in the works, the site has been transformed into a year-round family retreat.

"We're ecstatic — we wonder how we got this lucky," says one of the owners. "Our spirits rise every time we pull into the driveway." ■



#### DESIGN DECISIONS *A Stilted Solution*

The house's wood stilt foundation accommodates not only the site but also the confines of building on the island, where access for vehicles, equipment, and building materials is via small ferry. By using a system of 12-inch-by-12-inch Douglas fir posts, the significant cost and hassle of trucking concrete to the building site was avoided. Another benefit to stilts: they allow a glimpse of the bay beneath the elevated hallway that connects the living spaces with the master suite.

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER:  
Becker Structural Engineers, Inc.,  
Portland, Maine  
GENERAL CONTRACTOR:  
Cold Mountain Builders, Belfast, Maine

