

Fitted for Adventure



FEATURE—October 2010

By Deborah Weisgall | Photography Darren Setlow

A house anchors its owners to Kennebunk



Living in this house on Lords Point in Kennebunk is like living at sea. The point, a narrow tongue of land, stretches south into the Atlantic. At high tide, waves splash against the windows. All day shifting light reflects against the walls and ceiling, and in the evening the sunset flames in the sky over the bay.

When Michael and Robin Shea bought their house, it was a nondescript building on the west side of the point, looking across the cove where generations of Kennebunk children have learned to sail to the open ocean. "I've watched the house through the years," says Louise Hurlbutt of Hurlbutt Designs, who designed its elegant interiors and who is also a longtime resident of Kennebunk. "It went from being a chicken coop to what it is now."

And now it is a finely detailed contemporary take on a shingle-style house, open to the spectacular views and the changing light. Paul Gosselin of Salmon Falls Architecture set up subtle rhythms and patterns throughout the house: variously sized triple windows, arched doorways, and a curving gambrel roofline. Mullions, deck railings, and the railings of the widow's walk echo the circle-within-a-square motif introduced in the front gate. With these quiet details and carefully considered proportions, Gosselin, who has designed several houses on Lords Point, unified the structure without overwhelming the site.

Michael Shea had two goals when he bought the house: he wanted to bring the drama of the setting inside, and he wanted to maximize living space within the constraints of setbacks and allowable building height. Shea is a man with clear ideas about how to get what he wants, a Midwesterner who discovered Maine while he was in still in college at Ohio State. "I've been coming here since probably 1985. I had a college job working for an airline. You could fly anywhere you wanted for five dollars, and I just decided to go to Portland. I really liked it. Then I found the Kennebunk area and thought it was special. I bought my first place here ten years ago. On a lark, my wife and I were looking at real estate and found this house."

Renovating the house coincided with what Shea calls "a new chapter in my professional career." He had sold the health-care company he had founded twenty years prior, and with the newfound freedom to indulge his passions, was exploring new business and investment possibilities. "I'm a boater and I love to boat," he says. He takes time every summer to cruise the Maine coast. Recently he bought the Kennebunkport Marina as well as a waterfront hotel and restaurant.

Shea still spends most of the year in Louisville, Kentucky. His four children—the youngest is one, the eldest eighteen—tie him and his wife to school schedules. "We were actually doing two houses," Shea says of the Kennebunk renovation. "My wife and I had a deal. She got to do the Louisville house any way she wanted, and I got to do the Maine house. What I envisioned was that we needed another bedroom and space above the garage. The inside is where the story is. It was all choppy little rooms. I opened the whole thing up; I took all the inside walls out and put in wide-board floors. The house in Louisville is much fancier. Here I wanted something uncomplicated, with clean lines."

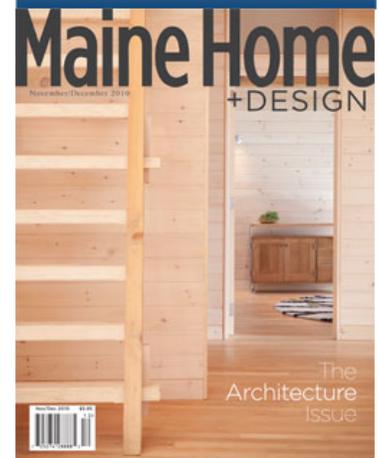
Achieving this apparent simplicity, however, was not easy. "It was definitely a challenge," says Norm Laliberte, project manager for Spang Builders, the construction firm. "But that was my favorite part of the project. There were strict building



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codes to adhere to and a strict time frame for construction. We began in November of 2007, and we were done by June. The family spends their summers here—it had to be finished.”



Lords Point is so narrow that workers had to park elsewhere and were shuttled to the site every morning. And taking all the inside walls out meant that a system had to be devised to support the structure and enable it to withstand high winds and the battering of the ocean. Laliberte explains: “We installed what is called a steel moment frame, sort of like a ladder: two vertical steel supports about eighteen feet apart joined by two or three horizontal steel pieces. To do that, we had to dig a special foundation, but we could only get a tiny excavator to the site, so most of the digging was done by hand. And the frame was on the ocean side, which meant we had to maneuver a crane to lower the steel into the existing wooden frame of the house.”

Shea credits Spang Builders with turning dreams into reality; Tim Spang negotiated the complex permits required to build so close to the waterline. “I’ve built a number of homes,” Shea says, “and usually I’m not happy with deadlines and promises. But they did a spectacular job. Every Friday I’d get an email with an update for the week, along with photographs. They did mockups showing how the stone around the fireplace could be done several ways. Spang is the best group I’ve ever worked with. And I’m a very particular individual; I focus on the details.”

For the details of the interior, Shea says, Louise Hurlbutt “was a great resource for me. She has her own ideas and her own style, and she brought these things to the project.” Hurlbutt punctuated the open spaces with rich, subtle detailing. The stairway combines rope-turned banisters with smooth ones, white-painted risers with a mahogany rail and treads. “The banisters were something we saw in an old ship,” she says. Hurlbutt incorporated nautical motifs everywhere, from the anchor shape cut out of the screen door to the compass rose in the floor of the master-bathroom shower. “This house is like being on a ship,” she says.

The walls, many of them covered in V-match tongue-and-groove boards, are painted white; interior colors are constrained to blue, beige, and white, with accents of red. “The biggest thing was to keep it calm inside,” Hurlbutt continues. “It’s like a painting outside. The point was not to conflict with the views; they make the big statement.” But Hurlbutt was also aware that so much open space, indoors and out, can become overwhelming. Clearly defined seating areas organize the living spaces, and carefully chosen estate pieces—the dining room chairs with painted stars on the seatbacks, Canton ginger jars, an antique sideboard, blue-and-white hurricane lamps—add warmth and a sense of history. In addition, Hurlbutt used furnishings to tie together the inside and the outside, to establish unifying points of reference. The chinoiserie bed in the master bedroom, for instance, picks up the square design of the front gate and deck railings.

In the landscape plan, Ted Carter of Carter Design Group emphasized the dramatic site as well, and at the same time built sheltering spaces from which to look out at the views. “This site has a fierce exposure to the open Atlantic,” Carter says. “The plant material had to be rugged.” He used irregular stone steps to “mimic the large outcroppings that comprise much of the point.” Another compass rose inlaid in the garden path serves as a reminder of the forces of nature, the winds and tides—and leads to a porch out of the wind.

“I never plan to leave here,” Shea says. “This is a family house. We’ve had so many great memories here. It’s a special place, and it’s a place where I plan to spend more and more time.” The house he has built is spacious and sturdy, a vessel to ferry him and his family on to new adventures.

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