House Marries Site

In Maine, a retirement home gets comfortable with the shapes, colors and textures of its wooded surroundings

BY ROC CAIVANO



Related roofs. *A slight lilt in the roof signals the entry. Photo above taken at A on floor plan. Stretched out to accommodate its ground-level floor plan, the house is capped with a series of related roof forms that fluctuate in height, mimicking the treeline. Photo to above right taken at B on floor plan.*



When I begin my work as an architect, I start by thinking like a farmer with limited resources—a farmer who can't afford to make dumb mistakes or his crops will die, and he will have to cut and burn eight cords of wood instead of four to stay warm through the winter. The farmer isn't going to perch a house on the crown of a hill, where the north wind will suck the heat out of it all winter. Instead, the farmer will build in the lee of that hill, on a slight rise so that the March rains won't flood across the ice-covered snow and seep under his door. The farmer starts designing his house by thinking about long-term shelter from the elements and exposure to the warmth of the sun. So do I.

I also encourage my clients to build houses that look as though they grew out of the existing landscape—as though they had been there forever. After all, I tell them, it's like having $40,000 worth of landscaping already

Photo above: Brian Vanden Brink

in place. We simply have to build the house in graceful relation to that natural landscaping. And that's just what we tried to do with May and Sam's retirement house (photos above, facing page).

May and Sam had purchased land on Maine's Mount Desert Island near a freshwater pond in an area protected by conservation easements. Sam had lived at the edge of salt water or fresh water most of his life and wanted to be as close to the edge of the pond as our rigorous state environmental laws would allow. So our first task was to determine just how much house May and Sam needed, then how to arrange it on the site.



Tapered muntins are a light touch. *Beveling the sides of the window muntins turns them into light-reflecting surfaces that keep the window frames from looking clunky.*

Retirement-house rules

As the old saying goes, "There's no hall as long as a flight of stairs." That about sums up the first rule of a retirement house, which is

CRAFTSMANSHIP TIES THIS HOUSE TO THE LANDSCAPE



Native plants and granite at the entry

Flamed granite pavers on the porch give way to honed granite tiles in the entryway (photo right taken at C on floor plan). The panels of the mahogany door depict local wildflowers and trees, beginning with ground covers on the lower panels (inset photo above).

that all its primary spaces must be on the ground floor, with as few steps to negotiate as possible. Only the secondary spaces, such as the guest rooms and the storage spaces, should be located on the second floor. May and Sam have a large, growing family, so their retirement house has plenty of room upstairs for visiting children and grandkids (floor plans, p. 60).

May and Sam's master suite is downstairs, along with the living room, the dining area and the kitchen. May and Sam each have their own offices, along with a small workshop and that necessity of Maine life, the mudroom. It's between the garage and the kitchen, and includes both an outside entry and one from the garage. Two rooms designed for enjoying Maine's best weather complete the plan: a screened porch off the master bedroom and a conservatory overlooking the pond.

Arriving at the right roof

The look of a roof exerts a powerful force on the way a house ultimately feels. So as soon as a house's floor plan starts to gel, I begin experimenting with roof shapes. They all have their different personalities. For example, pyramids and hipped roofs appear monumental. Gables are linear and can be extruded to balance other forms. Rounded roofs soften the impact. Another time-honored design tool for fashioning a roof is the "Mama Bear, Papa Bear, Baby Bear" relationship, which holds that similar shapes of different sizes look comfortable next to one another. I used all these ideas in shaping the overall form of this roof.

Photo above right: Brian Vanden Brink

The living spaces are stretched out, following the shoreline of the pond and giving us the opportunity to create a series of nested gables. The varied ridgelines repeat the pattern of the surrounding treetops, helping to tailor the house to its landscape.

We used three other strategies to fit the house to its site further. First, the parts of the building mimic the scale and proportion of details found in the surrounding woods. For example, the columns are similar in diameter to the nearby tree trunks, and the muntins of the second-floor windows repeat the size and density of the branches at that height. We also painted the window sashes and doors the color of local red-maple branches in the winter, and we stained the shingles and the siding the color of the granite boulders that surround the site. The curving dormers—both eyebrow and shed—echo the rounded forms of these same boulders.

Follow the stone path inside

A gravel path leads to the front entry of the house, where the column bears on a granite rock placed atop granite pavers. The pavers, which have a rough texture, progress to honed granite at the door's threshold (photo right, facing page).

May is an active member and past president of the New England Wildflower Society, and her love of Maine's local flora influenced the front door. Local woodcarver Wayne Edmunson detailed each mahogany panel with portraits of local plants, beginning with ground covers in the lower panels.

Although they aren't distinguished by carvings, two other entries are worth noting. May has a lot of potted plants that need to spend the winter in a cool, dry place. So we included an outside stairwell to the basement and sheltered it with a pop-up roof. It's held open by brackets common to the automotive industry (photos bottom right). And where the entries aren't protected by a roof, we installed trench grates (photo top right).

Details from subtle to prominent

Inside the entry, a floor-to-ceiling window overlooks May's garden. The tapered muntins between the window panes act as reflecting surfaces to frame each window pane with facets of light (inset photo, p. 57). Custom-made by local woodworker Joe Tracy, this window helps to lighten the visual weight of the sturdy bars required in a large window.

Drawing this page: Bob La Pointe

GREAT IDEAS

INGENIOUS ENTRYWAYS

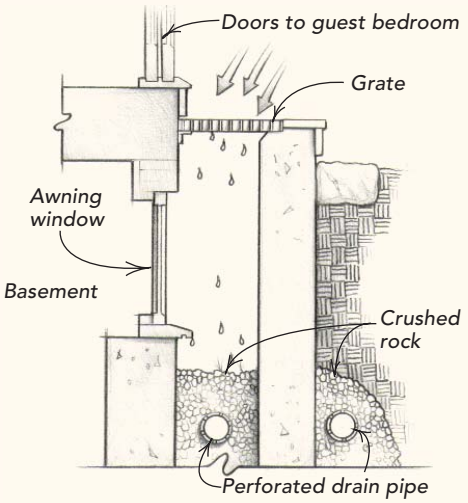
Can a drainage channel illuminate a basement?

Some of the most sensible details in a house have been around a long time, then forgotten, then rediscovered. The combination trench grate/step outside the first-floor guest bedroom is that kind of detail. The primary purpose of the step is to keep the interior floor level closer to grade without exposing the base of the door to rain and snow. Water, ice and snow fall through the grate, collecting in a catch basin full of crushed rock and a drain line. As shown in the section drawing below, we also use the basin as a lightwell for the basement. Combined with an awning-type window, this arrangement also can provide welcome ventilation to a basement.

—R. C.



Section through drain



Pop-up roof shelters basement stairs

A lightweight three-piece roof protects the outdoor stairway to the basement. As each roof section is opened, it gets an assist from a pneumatic support bracket, the kind used to open and brace SUV tailgates. A piano hinge allows the triangular section of wall that engages the top tread of the stair to fold out of the way.





ONLINE CONNECTION

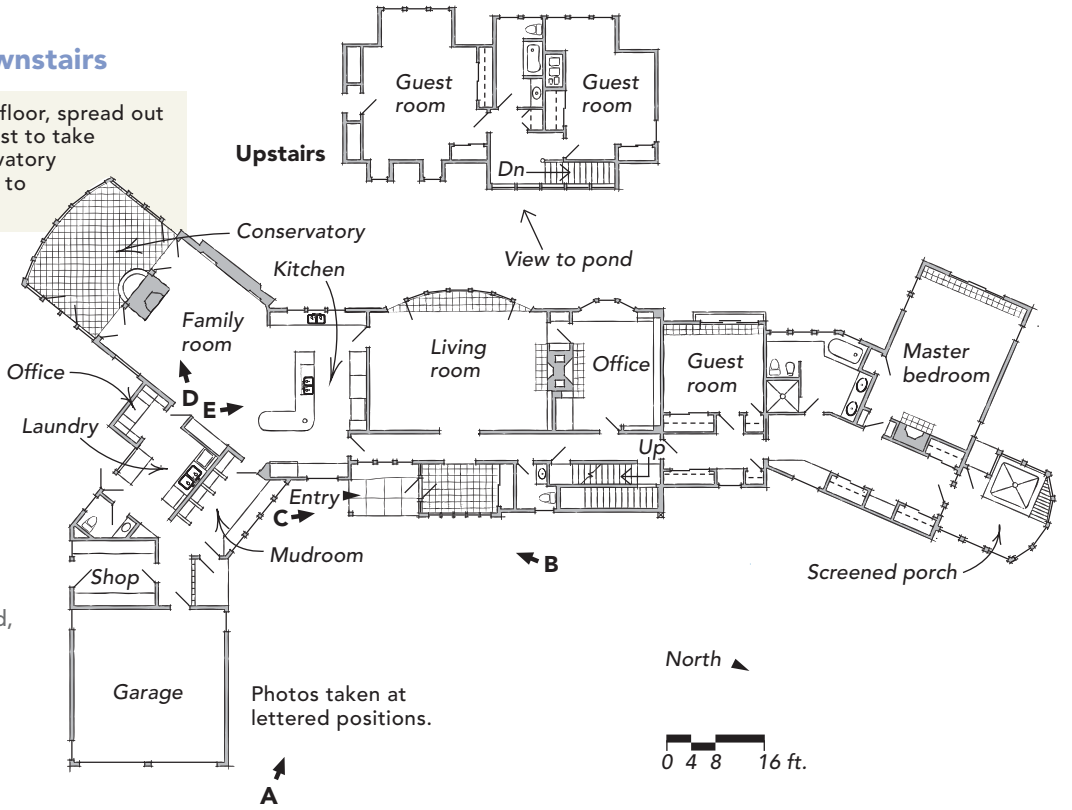
View this pop-up roof on our Web site at www.finehomebuilding.com.

Guests sleep upstairs, everybody hangs out downstairs

Most of the house is on the ground floor, spread out along the shore of a pond to the west to take advantage of the views. The conservatory and screened porch are ideal places to enjoy Maine's best weather.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 4
Bathrooms: 2 full, 2 half
Size: 5000 sq. ft.
Cost: N/A
Completed: 2000
Location: Mount Desert Island, Maine
Architect: Roc Caivano
Builder: David Sweet



As a counterpoint to the strict grids of the windows and the tile floors, arcing lines occur throughout the house. They can be found as arches over entries, bump-outs at bay windows and the roof inflection over the entry (photo p. 57).

A kitchen with plenty of counter space was a high priority for Sam and May. A big L-shaped island with overhangs for bar stools on the inside of the L makes room for both kibbitzers and cooks (photo right).

Opposite the kitchen stands the enduring symbol of life in the Maine woods: the granite fireplace (photo facing page). This one was built by Freshwater Stonemasons, a local company that specializes in fireplaces made of massive rocks that have been scribe-fit to one another. With its simple shapes and ancient textures, the fireplace exerts a primitive power from the end of the room, enticing people away from the dinner table to feel its warmth and to sit by its thick hearth. □

Roc Caivano is an architect in Bar Harbor, ME. Photos by Charles Miller, except where noted.



Cool on one side, warm on the other. *At the south end of the house, a granite fireplace built with massive stones and tight joints separates the family room from the conservatory. Photo facing page taken at E on floor plan. At holiday gatherings, the kitchen's big L-shaped island provides plenty of space for hanging out or preparing meals. Photo left taken at D on floor plan.*

Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault

ARE FOCUSED ON THE FIREPLACE

