

LESS IS MORE

Sullivan Pair Build Smaller Home and Pare Down Lifestyle

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Ellsworth American

May 8, 2008

When working with an architect, it's important to clarify exactly what you want.

In 2006, David Cadigan and Vincent Montgomery sat down to enlighten architect Bruce Norelius, whom they'd asked to design their new house on a ledgy Sullivan hillside overlooking Frenchman Bay.

Cadigan told Norelius he wanted something "warm and friendly."

And Montgomery? "I said I wanted it cold and uninviting." He was joking only a little.

Norelius, of Elliott, Elliott & Norelius in Blue Hill, took on the project anyway.

"It was clear right from the beginning that this would be a really interesting job," he said at the almost-completed house in early April. Although his two clients had "different ways of defining" what they wanted, opposing goals are not uncommon when a building project begins.

"You just start down the path and the project takes on a life of its own," Norelius said.

He was intrigued by the areas of agreement between the two. "They wanted an unabashedly contemporary house. And it was going to be small, which was really interesting to me, and they had a budget.

They said all the right things as clients: They didn't want a lot of fancy fixtures, and they understood it was all about doing something simple."

The house that Norelius ended up designing consists of two rectangles at right angles. The south-facing walls are mostly glass, taking advantage of the sun and the soul-soaring view.

Having only 2,200 square feet of living space to work with, Norelius contrasted teeny-tiny utility areas with a second-floor living/dining/kitchen of nearly 1,000 square feet.

"You need a contrast between big spaces and small spaces," he said.

The pantry, for example, is hidden behind a white wall next to the kitchen. It's 5 feet wide, barely enough to open the refrigerator door. In the master bath between the two bedrooms downstairs, the washer and dryer have a similarly constricted space.

Inside the entrance door, the visitor is confronted with a dark, narrow hallway running right and left – he has no indication of where he's suppose to go. The correct choice follows the hallway to the left and around a corner for the first big surprise: a comparatively wide, light-filled staircase up to the living room.

"I like the idea of mystery and unfolding," Norelius said. "That's hard to have in a small house."

The two bedrooms and master bath are on the first floor, behind the wall of that austere entry hallway. The bedrooms are identical each with a built-in bedstead facing the view and a work area – desk, drawers, bookshelves – behind the bed.

Cadigan's bedroom has a screened porch to one side, next door to a small utility room for the radiant heat furnace.

Upstairs is the living area, pantry, a powder room, and a ginormous deck, 605 square feet. Everything's rectangular and uncluttered, airy, light-filled.

Cadigan and Montgomery went into the design process knowing something about architecture. "We're the first clients Bruce ever borrowed books from," Cadigan said.

Cadigan's books tend to be on historic architecture. He's spent the past 39 years living in a 220-year-old cape and accumulating stuff.

Montgomery, on the other hand, shares with Norelius an admiration for the work of John Pawson, a British architect whose typical living room design would be an empty rectangle with a single, perfectly placed chair and a stone bench along the wall.

"Vincent's a minimalist," Cadigan said. "I'm a maximalist."

The new house tends toward the minimal. Cadigan said he started the design process wanting something modern – “but nothing like this. There, I’ve said it.”

The house has won him over. He’s the one who leads a visitor up hill and down dale to get the best possible views of its contours. He’s captivated by the fact that you can stand in the back and see through the house to the hills of Mount Desert.

The only remaining problem is that the house is uncluttered by storage space.

Each bedroom has one closet, and one wall of the carport is devoted to 120 square feet of storage compartments.

The bedrooms and the living room have bookshelf/drawer combinations on one wall each. The kitchen islands have lots of drawers.

That’s it. As of early April, Cadigan had no idea where most of his 39 years’ worth of stuff would end up.

“It’s just a matter of asking yourself, ‘Why do I want to keep this?’” Montgomery said. Cadigan just looked at him, Norelius, grinning, suggested hanging on to the old house just for storage. Cadigan threatened to buy a storage container from Home Depot and park it in front of the house. The debate was unresolved at press time.

Although the house sits on 50 acres, the actual building site was tiny, crammed between the property line and a sharp drop-off. “It’s like an urban site,” Montgomery said.

Norelius designed the footprint to be as simple as possible because the slab was to be poured on unblasted ledge, and therefore couldn’t accommodate standard concrete forms.

The design, Norelius said, turned out to be “amazingly cost effective. It’s all wood framed and the framing system is very simple, so it went up quickly.”

The house is framed with wooden/composite I-beams capable of long spans and of supporting a 2-inch-thick concrete second floor.

Both floors are concrete with radiant heat, treated with a clear sealant to obviate the need for additional finished flooring.

In keeping with the rectangular theme, the house has what looks like a flat roof. But “a flat roof is never totally flat,” Norelius said.

On top of the flat sheathing, contractors installed rigid insulation pitched to shed water into a gutter at the back of the house. The insulation is covered by an impermeable membrane.

Parapets on three sides preserve the illusion of a flat roof.

The roof under the deck also is sloped to the back.

Over three years of design, bidding and construction, Norelius and his two clients have developed a “big picture” approach to resolving such issues.

On some subjects, Cadigan and Montgomery were adamant. They wanted a small footprint on their ledgy site, with little disturbance of the native shrubs and trees that lived there. And no blasting.

Other subjects were negotiable. Cardigan argued successfully for a window in an eastern wall that Norelius and Montgomery wanted to look blank from the outside, and another in the pantry.

The minimalists stood firm, however, when Cardigan pressed for a powder-room window in the almost-blank eastern wall.

“It was a very harmonious process,” Montgomery said. “Very enjoyable. We had a good way of working through issues - we were on the same wavelength.”

“Bruce should have been a doctor,” Cardigan said.

It helped, Montgomery added, that the clients had told Norelius from the outset “not to let us mess this house up.”

“We were all able to keep our eye on the big picture here,” Norelius said.

HATS OFF TO THE CREW

David Cadigan, Vincent Montgomery and architect Bruce Norelius agree on one thing: the quality and inventiveness of the contractors involved in building Cadigan's and Montgomery's new house.

Robert Johnson of Sullivan did the site preparation and septic system with remarkably little ground disturbance. Alan Doll Construction of Holden poured and pinned the foundation slab on the existing ledge without blasting.

The general contractor was Peacock Co. Builders of Lamoine. "Tobin was fantastic about getting the house to budget level," Norelius said.

Peacock's contributions even included designing a deck railing from marine stays and posts custom made by a marine fabricator.

Cabinetry was by Mark Leonardi of Bar Harbor and Steve Whalen of Tremont.

Also contributing were structural engineer Albert Putnam of Seasport, lighting designer, Peter Knupple of Sullivan, surveyor Sage Collins of Blue Hill, John Gilbert Well Drillers of Ellsworth, Lunt's Heating of Lamoine, Coastline Plumbing of Lamoine, Excalibur Electric of Ellsworth and Roof Systems of Maine in Bangor and Celement Masonry of Old Town, Wizard Walls of Hancock, Builders Insulation, Red Ladder Painting of Bar Harbor and Wingers Welding of Trenton.

Materials came from EBS. The concrete came from Thibodeau and Sons, Hancock.