Nantucket, Naturally

STORY BY LAUREL KORNHISER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY POMMETT

New England's northeast winds are notorious, so much so, in fact, that storms coming off the ocean are named for them. Known as nor'easters, they usually signify three days of wild weather and shore-battering winds. When Lyman Perry and his project architect, Jeffrey Spoelker, were asked to design a guest house to be built on the northeast edge of Nantucket, an island already situated thirty miles out to sea, sweeping in the ocean vistas while taming the incoming elements posed a challenge. Moreover, the family-friendly guest house would not only need to withstand strong winds and winter storms, but also the energy and activity of grandchildren.

Inspired partly by the homeowners' appreciation of Arts and Crafts bungalow-style architecture and Lyman Perry's deep knowledge of Nantucket's environment, history, and home styles, the guest house nestles into the landscape, without sacrificing views of the sun rising over the Atlantic to the east, of its setting over Sesachacha Pond to the west, or of Sankaty Light standing watch over all.

Hand-hewn timbers frame the pickled V-groove wall boards and red brick chimney of the living room. The homeowner had collected the carved shorebirds, which were then strategically mounted on the chimney's facade by art installer Bill Stender. Fields of hardy wildflowers surround the house, delaying the eye's journey to the sea beyond.

The house is known by its owners as the "Dog Bone," not because the couple's children and grandchildren need any coaxing to visit, but because its configuration resembles the shape of the canine treat. A central pavilion—entry, living room, kitchen, and dining area—acts as a connector for two end joints, one for each family, where a semi-private sitting area leads to a master and a children's bedroom. The two "pod" bedrooms form a V: "We broke up the orthogonal," explains Lyman. "The bedrooms are at forty-five degree angles, so you have at least three facades. They are not adjacent to each other and instead form a triangle. This allows you to take advantage of both pond and ocean views." This design also minimizes the weather's impact. "It's close to the ground," he explains. "Rather than making a two-story space, which the wind would hit, it hunkers down and diverts the air on a windy day."

The house neither overpowers the site nor is overpowered by it. "It spreads and so blends with the landscape," says Jeff. Scrub pines, streams of swaying grasses, and patches of wildflowers soften the scene surrounding the house. Swaths of daisies, coreopsis, lupine, poppies, and digitalis beguile the eye long before it reaches the edge of the bluff and the forever water beyond. (Keeping deer, rabbits and other critters from nibbling away the gardens designed by James van Sweden and maintained by caretakers Bob and Laurel Seely is a constant challenge on the property.) The dusky colors of Russian sage leading up to the entry complement the home's gray-shingled facade. Protective eaves, overhanging by three and a half feet, ease the transition from this outer world to the home's interior.

The entrance to the house is just off center. "The idea was that there would be no front door," explains Jeff. "A foyer would have gotten in the way. Instead, you walk into a front door that is off to the side and experience a 'Wow!' moment when you step through the vestibule, and looking in both directions, you see the water."

While the views of waving water and swaying plants outside and the living room's "floating" red brick chimney mast, populated by shorebirds seemingly aloft on its facade, might induce a feeling of being unanchored, adrift in a moving landscape, the home's exposed oak timber frame—its hand-hewn

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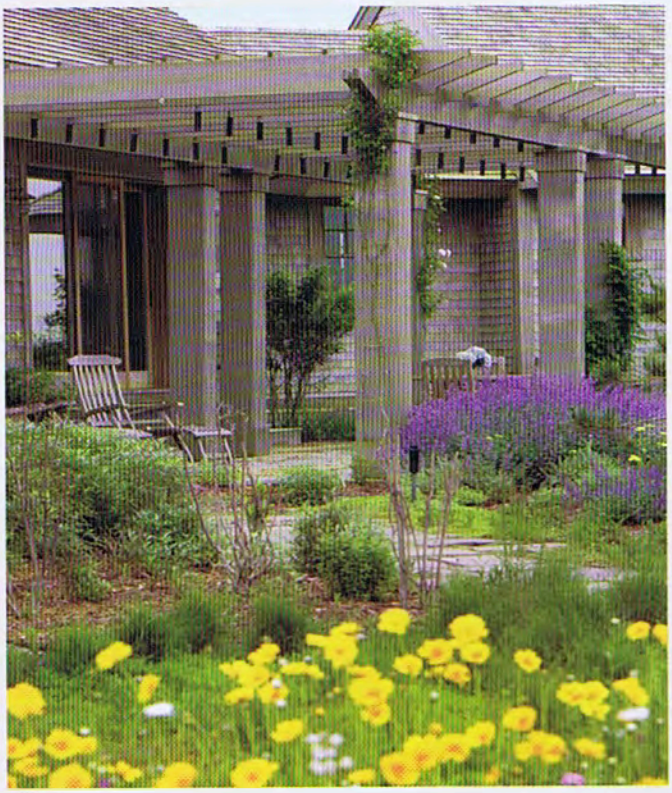

beams and posts framing wooden walls—provides a heft that creates a sense of rootedness amidst the motion. When presented with the blueprints for the home, interior designer Ellie Cullman suggested that the timbers, provided by RiverBend Timber in Michigan, be scored with a hand Adze to add a sense of time to their weight. Jeff comments on the effect: "The house has very little plaster—it's mostly all wood. The hand-hewn oak timber frame lends itself to a rougher texture. The splits give it a sense that is has been there awhile. There's a comfort in that." Comfort but not claustrophobia, as can be the case in compact timber frame homes: "There's enough volume," Jeff adds, "so you don't feel confined."

While timber frames can feel heavy and dark, this home's light, pickled V-groove walls negate that effect. The boards run horizontally, and Lyman says there is historic precedent for this configuration: "Instead of vertical bead board, which everyone is doing, we went with horizontal, which is the way the boards ran in the old cottages and can also be seen in an old church downtown."

Lyman knows Nantucket's architecture well. This former teacher of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania has a relationship with the island that goes back fifty years. He started out renovating old houses. "By purchasing and fixing them up, I got a good sense of old cottages. A lot of them were built by shipwrights. In many, the floors were not straight, the frames and buildings start to sag, but that gives them 'charm.' The question when renovating is how much 'charm' to leave." As a member of the Nantucket Preservation Trust, an advocacy group devoted to protecting the island's historic fabric, Lyman believes in educating his clients about the island's unique history, its Quaker influences, and its fragile landscape. In fact, one of the reasons he felt an immediate connection with the owners of this 85-acre property was that like them, he had been on several wilderness trips, and they shared a mutual respect for sensitive environments.

Naturally, though, anyone owning an ocean-front property wants to enjoy the views, and with this house, that is achieved not by height, but by a smart design that allows access without towering over the bluff. The common core areas of the house take in the water views through triptychs of eight-foot tall windows. Contributing to the airiness is the kitchen's open design. A pergola overhangs the food preparation area, supporting open shelves and racks for dishes, glasses, and pans. Generous counter space means elbow-room for cooks, with the onlookers sitting on the other side of the island, close enough for conversation but out of the line of kitchen traffic. When dinner is ready, a custom-made trestle table easily accommodates the crowd. When the meal is over and the children are tired out,

A patch of Russian sage serves as the perfect complement for the sheltered patio in the front of the house. The pergola outside finds its match in one overhanging the kitchen island. Both join the sliding glass doors in framing views of Sesachacha Pond.

A 19th-century Canadian cupboard and the trestle table are in keeping with the home's rustic look. Pulling the dining area's colors together is the Claire Murray Button Rug, inspired by the wool scrap penny rugs made by women in the 19th century.

(right) Area rugs from Claire Murray's Chesapeake Collection complement the color scheme of one sitting room, where twin cubed coffee tables and "Tic Tac Toe" F. Schumacher fabrics make for a family friendly design. (above) Sankaty Light is just visible through the master bedroom window.

the families retreat to their own ends of the house. The parents can tuck the kids into bed and sink into a love seat in their own intimate sitting area before calling it a night.

While the ubiquitousness of oak—the floors, the walls, and the framing—gives the house its solidity and timelessness, Ellie Cullman felt it was important to counterbalance the weight of wood with a "bright and bold palette." She says, "While other houses on Nantucket generally try to achieve a sandy, muted decor reflective of the beach landscape, here we took our design cue from the bold vocabulary of the architecture. The house would not have been successful with wafting white curtains, and pale fabrics would have disappeared." Instead, working with Claire Ratliff, her project manager, Ellie introduced a green, yellow, and red color scheme, with just hints of blue, the colors mixed in what she calls "different recipes" throughout the house. Each room thus feels distinctive without upsetting the unity of the overall design. "The house is open from one room to another and to the outside, so the color scheme gives it a continuity of color and texture." While the fabrics are high end and grown up, Ellie, who has worked with the homeowners on other projects, knew the house was made for families with children, so both the palette and the incorporation of the clients' love of Americana—seen in such pieces as a long panel celebrating "Liberty and Independence" dated 1805—"suited the informal, child-friendly ambience they hoped to achieve. The house completely reflects the personality of the owners; they are low key." To reinforce the family connection, albeit it simply and symbolically, Ellie and Claire introduced X's and O's, for kisses and hugs, in the entryway carpet, the bedding, and decorative accessories.

Family connections are ultimately what this house is about, giving family members spaces for informal gatherings and places for privacy. And whether the sun is shining and the breeze is light or the winds are howling and the sea is being whipped into a frenzy of frothiness, this home hovers protectively, keeping everyone in touch with each other and with New England's weather—fickle and fascinating, wild and beautifully mild.