

FUN

FOLLOWS

FUNCTION

A new house in
Rockport, Massachusetts,
combines high and
low tech to deliver a
breezy summer retreat

WRITTEN BY REGINA COLE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC ROTH





TWO STEEL I-BEAMS reinforce the ceiling to allow one large room on the first floor. In the spirit of summer living, windows let in salty breezes and the door is almost always open. Both airflow and noise are controlled via a horizontal window, which slides into place above the dining table.

WELL LOVED AND USED BY THE CHILDREN
AND GRANDCHILDREN OF ITS FIRST OWNER.



the 1920s “shaky ancestral summer shack” was foundering. “One bedroom was falling off, into the ocean,” recalls Don Knerr, project architect for Charles R. Myer & Partners Ltd. of Cambridge, Massachusetts. When the current owners, a professional couple, inherited the structure and its glorious site atop a rocky promontory at ocean’s edge in Rockport, Massachusetts, they envisioned a summer retreat that would easily accommodate them, their four children, various pets, and a constant flow of friends and relatives. Remarkably, they got a new house that sits on the same footprint as the demolished original, but at 3,600 square feet is more than double the size of its predecessor — all without deviating from the unpretentious spirit of the original cottage.

The new two-story structure is a modern take on the Cape Cod-style house, complete with traditional cedar shingles stained gray and wood trim painted white. As befits an ocean-side summer home, it fairly bristles with decks, porches (both open and screened), viewing platforms, and bays. The cheerful crowning touch is a rectangular, windowed cupola sporting a sea serpent weather vane riding above a blue glass sphere.

“The house is very complicated in its simplicity,” says John Ellis, project manager for S+H Construction, the Cambridge company that built the house. “It looks very simple, but the technology is carefully thought out.” He points to two steel beams supporting the structure. “They are what allow the first floor to be wide open.” The

.....
ARCHITECTURE
CHARLES R.
MYER &
PARTNERS LTD.

.....
INTERIOR
DESIGN
ANDRA
BIRKERTS
INTERIOR
DESIGN
.....

GLASS TOPS A large, brightly painted island in the kitchen, which echoes the functional informality of the overall design with open shelving. The house (FACING PAGE), which is hard by the Atlantic Ocean, is glorious in summer but requires construction rugged enough to weather winter storms.



DESIGN DECISION

Simply Air

The cupola (circled below) is more than just a fun add-on. It is part of an intentional design in which state-of-the-art systems regulate temperature, light, and noise while also maintaining structural integrity.

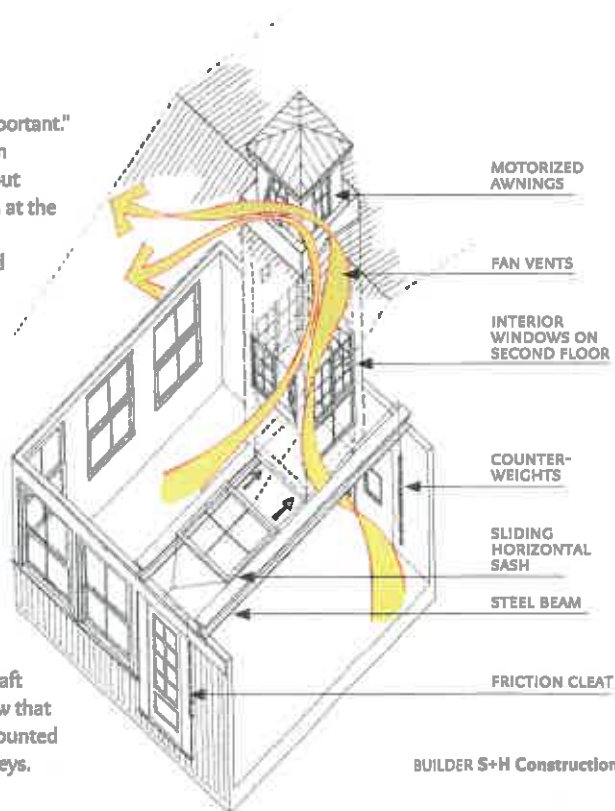
"First thing the homeowners said was that they did not want air conditioning," says John Ellis, project manager for builder S+H Construction in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "They talked about how, once a house has AC, it gets sealed off from the outside. That's not why they come here." So keeping the house naturally cool drove much of the design, including the cupola, which architect Don Knerr says "was almost an afterthought. I designed it when the homeowners decided against a fireplace, to give the crowning height you usually get from a chimney. It's the only thing for which we needed a special permit, because it exceeds the height limit. That cupola is not only



decorative, it turns out to be incredibly important."

Relief from August heat comes when low-tech whole-house fans draw hot air out through the cupola windows, which open at the touch of a button. At the same time, the cupola, which is open through the second floor to the living area below, allows natural light to flood the interior spaces. An architectural element in its own right, the second-floor "air shaft" provides unexpected interior windows

that can be closed and curtained. If the owners don't want to funnel heat up and out, say in the chillier days of the off-season, or if they want to shelter sleeping children from adult first-floor noise, they can close the air shaft with a horizontal window that is operated with wall-mounted ropes, weights, and pulleys.



BUILDER S+H Construction

A CORNER OF the living room (BELOW) is furnished with a Richard Mulligan rope bed and 1960s French beechwood chairs. The bunk room (RIGHT) is outfitted with boat ladders and retro-style fans. Ochre's Arctic Pear chandelier (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) lights the kitchen's office nook.



space is 22 feet by 26 feet, with no walls to block the views. “The house is overbuilt and the windows are double-glazed, because the house is so exposed to the weather,” Ellis says, noting that in winter, storms often sheath the house with frozen saltwater spray. Invisible high-tech elements include radiant heat, steel porch columns, blown-in insulation, and soundproofing.

But the decor is low-key old-time summer. “We were careful to not overdesign the interior,” says Andra Birkerts of Andra Birkerts Interior Design in Wellesley, Massachusetts, who previously had teamed up with Charles Myer and S+H to build the family’s year-round residence in Lexington, Massachusetts.

“The last thing they need is fussy furniture that’s hard to care for,” says

Birkerts. “The family comes here to enjoy being by the sea. They sail, swim, barbecue, go to the Fourth of July bonfire, watch the sunset. We kept the interior light, with blues and greens used as accent colors.” And, she notes, “all the fabrics have to be tough.”

Her greatest challenge was the big, open first-floor living/dining area. There, she opted for conversational groupings that allow for a constant flow of traffic. “People are always coming and going through all these doors,” she says. “Usually, there are wet dogs, sand, or wet bathing suits involved.”

Upstairs in the children’s bunk room, steel ladders lead not only to upper beds, but also to ceiling-height aeries and secret hide-aways. Enormous windows flood the room with light. “This is a kids’ house

**FOR MORE
DETAILS,
SEE
RESOURCES**



as much as it is for adults," says Birkerts. "Ten children can sleep in this bunk room, and there's another children's room, which has a little private deck looking down on the main entry. Kids can come and go; there are all sorts of magical spaces."

There are nautical overtones throughout, but Birkerts steered clear of clichés, opting instead for subtle touches like a shower curtain that once was a sail.

The basement, which contains the laundry area and a guest suite, also functions as a rainy-day room with a rolling cart full of cubbies stocked with art supplies. "There's no TV in the house," Birkerts notes with a smile.



During the design phase, the location of the bed in the master suite changed several times. "At first it was against the wall," says Birkerts. "Then the homeowner told me that she wanted to wake up looking right at the water, so we put the bed in the middle of the room. Now it feels like an old-fashioned sleeping porch."

"It looks rustic and simple," John Ellis says. "But in the very careful use of space, and in the way the design is all about function, this house is constructed like a boat."

"The house is really kid-centered and playful," Don Knerr says. "But it's also seriously functional." ■