

Great and Small

Despite a tight fit, a Branford beach home goes big on cottage charm.

BY JENNIFER CARMICHAEL



Greg and Rita Raucci had long been looking for a coastal house anywhere from Milford to Stonington. Then, one day in March 2018, Greg saw a 1920s cottage in a real estate flier. It had been on the market for a while and the price had dropped. And while they had never heard of the Indian Neck section of Branford, they decided to Google it and go take a look.

“We weren’t searching for a waterfront property, but we knew that we wanted to be near the water,” says Rita, whose primary home is in Fairfield County. “This cottage met our criteria, and then some, sitting only one house away from the beach. It checked other boxes too—city water, city sewer, and a marina nearby for Greg’s boat. I don’t particularly care for boating, but I wanted to be able to take a walk by the shore.”

After purchasing the cottage in April 2018, they originally thought they’d fix up the two-bedroom, one-bathroom, 900-square-foot house and winterize it. But after spending their first summer there, they tapped Joe Sepot of Branford-based Joseph Sepot Architects to design something bigger and more aesthetically pleasing. They wanted a place where their two children could visit with their families as well as a home in which they could one day reside year-round.

“I produced several preliminary sketches to show Rita and Greg. I wanted to be sure I captured everything they wanted to have in their second home,” says Sepot, who does a lot of commercial work in the Greater New Haven area with Greg’s firm, Bismark Construction of Milford. “It’s a very, very tight site. The footprint of the house is long and narrow due to local zoning restrictions. We knew it was important to maximize daylight and create a sense of expansiveness within the compact footprint. We selected



The long and short of it: A mixture of materials including painted board and batten siding and stained cedar shingles breaks up a lengthy stretch of house, while a pretty pergola offers a cozy outdoor spot.

(at right) With such a long area, the homeowners could space things out a bit. "Everybody stacks the TV and fireplace," Greg Raucci says. "I loved the look of side-by-side. Nobody ever does it that way."



The master bedroom's cathedral ceiling and a high-placed window give a majestic and spacious feel to the smaller home.



light interior finishes to reflect daylight to further this goal."

After putting pencil to paper, Sepot put together a set of drawings that Greg, who took on the role of contractor, could move forward with. It included an open kitchen, eating and living area; master bedroom; a second bedroom with multiple beds for the couple's five grandchildren; two bathrooms; and a laundry area. The plans, which almost doubled the home's square footage, also kept the screened-in porch at the back of the house, which was important to them in maintaining a summery feel.

"I never thought that on that site that we'd be able to get the square footage that Joe was able to get," Greg says. "The screened porch doesn't count as living square footage, but when we open up these wide, 16-foot sliders, the house just expands. Even in the winter and the other seasons, the grandkids are always playing on the porch, so it's extra space for us."

The exterior of the house radiates charm and includes classic detailing traditionally found in vintage 19th-century cottages, as does the detached two-car garage, which they restored during the property's six-month construction process, which began in February 2019. To reduce its horizontal massing, the exterior of the home is differentiated by a



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Proof positive that a narrow location needn't be claustrophobic, the 12-foot-wide kitchen opens to a 24-foot-wide living space. "You're looking through these big, beautiful French doors out to the porch and the view," Rita Raucci says.



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mixture of building materials including painted board and batten siding and stained cedar shingles.

Greg adds that a side pergola is the perfect design element against the white siding and brings the cottage feel into perspective, “especially when you see the size and unique flare of the raft tails from our walk back from the beach. We were surprised how the pergola provides shade at times with the angle of the sun within the kitchen.”

Septot says that the pergola visually balances the overall elevation of the home. It adjusts the home’s vertical massing, bringing the eye down, and creates an intimate outdoor living area that is perfect for family gatherings and dining al fresco. Plus, it’s located off the kitchen for ease of entertaining.

“We didn’t build one of those huge mega mansions,” Greg says. “Rita and I liked the cottage style and we wanted to keep it typical to the area. One of Rita’s prerequisites was that we’d still have a lawn for the grandkids to run around. And it worked out great.”

In fact, Greg thought the house came out so well that he suggested Septot submit it for an award. As luck would have it, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Connecticut recently recognized the home with an Alice Washburn Excellence Award in the New Construction category. Named for the distinguished Connecticut designer and builder of the 1920s, the program acknowledges excellence in traditional house design through the thoughtful adaptation of tradition to address 21st-century needs.

Jurors noted: “Well-proportioned, clean, simple lines. Highly efficient use of space and effective daylighting. A delightful retreat, scaled to a laid-back day at the beach. Great things come in small packages!”

“At the end of the day, I just wanted to have a place where the family could come,” says Greg, who enjoys being close to their main residence. “It turned out perfect since our kids are within driving distance. I didn’t want a place too far where they would have a tough time being with us in the summer. When people move far away for second homes, I don’t understand it. You don’t have to go far to find it.” ■