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THIS MONTH'S HOME

by Ned Depew

The Lake House Redux

Once, there was a lake house. It was a comfortable, modest vacation home on a lakefront parcel with a guest cottage and garage. It had been



This photo montage shows a perspective sketch of the house from the driveway, courtesy of James Dixon Architect

inexpensively

constructed for seasonal use according to the standards of an earlier time. It had a certain “retro” charm, but it needed massive restructuring to meet the needs of a modern family. But, regardless of its deficiencies, the lot it was on and the lake it fronted made it a very special place.

When the property was put up for sale, neighbors from another part of the lake who had admired the location with its shoreline access, mature trees and protection from encroachment by adjoining open land owned by a not-for-profit institution were happy to be able to buy it. But, the problem remained, what to do about the buildings.

The guest cottage had had a fire and had never been repaired—it was little more than a shell. A land survey discovered that the garage was partly built on the adjoining open parcel. An engineering study found many deficiencies in the main house, from loose and leaking windows to a questionable septic system to deterioration of some of the structural framing.

James Dixon, an architect whose practice is headquartered in Chatham, was called in to consult. It didn't take long to conclude that “renovations” would be impractical, costing at least nearly as much as (and possibly more than) new construction, and yielding less satisfying results. With the full collaboration of the new owners, Dixon and his colleague, Christopher Billingham, who served as Project Architect set out to create a structure to suit their needs, fit into the existing neighborhood and provide a charming and inviting family home.

The clients admired many things about traditional “shingle-style” homes as designed by HH Richardson, McKim, Meade and White, Gustav Stickley and others. They liked the way the houses fit into their sites, and the asymmetries that gave them visual interest and a sense of spontaneity. They liked the texture and variety of the materials used for exterior facing. They also wanted the building to look like it had been in place over the years, rather than like brand new construction. Dixon and Billingham worked to incorporate all these ideas into the design.

The plan they came up with—through several



A simple photo showing the whole reason for the project.
courtesy of James Dixon Architect

re-inventions—is a rambling, slightly eccentric-looking structure that takes advantage of its location without dominating the site. It is set well back from the shore front—for practical as well as aesthetic reasons—and situated to preserve the mature trees that frame the views both of and from the house. The trees help create the impression that the house has been there as long as they have.

The layout uses the bulk of the house to screen the lake-front yard from the street and create a sense of privacy. The L-shaped plan of the house creates an elevation facing the lake that is not overpowering, keeping it in proportion to the lot and surrounding houses. It belies how large the house actually is—at about 3,500 square feet.

Natural materials help connect the house to its surroundings. Fieldstone is used throughout, with most of the materials having been collected in the region. Large slabs of rough cut marble, quite possibly rejected cuttings from the quarries in nearby Richmond, MA, that were found during site-preparation and excavation have been used as steps, and incorporated into the living room fireplace.

In keeping with the “imaginary history,” Dixon and the owners were writing for the house, they wanted it to feel like a family home that had started small and grown over the years. With that in mind, it is the main section of the building, fronting the lake, that has the bulk of the “shingle style” details—the shingle siding, two chimneys (one of brick, one of fieldstone), the wrap-around porch with timbered posts set on fieldstone pedestals, the dormers and characteristic window-groups.

The ell was conceived as a “1980s addition,” as Dixon describes it, simple and rectilinear with little ornamentation. That addition connects to the garage, which was conceptualized as a modern addition, but one designed to echo the kinds of detailing typical of the original house. The “garage” is actually a multi-purpose space, which contains a bunk room with its own bath for the extended family's kids upstairs, and a large play room for them taking the place of one of the garage bays below.

Although designed to have the look and feel of turn-of-the-20th century vacation homes, the structure and mechanicals are up to contemporary standards. Soy-based spray-foam insulation, a green product that seals against air leakage while it insulates, was used throughout. The windows and doors are state-of-the-art with insulated glass, modern weatherstripping and insulation.

Dixon credits the building contractor who led the job—Bill Stratton Building of Old

Chatham—with contributing a number of significant ideas to the project as well as suggesting avenues to expedite and improve the building process. He also credits Stratton and his crew with bringing a high level of craftsmanship and expertise to the job, that re-created the kind of care and attention to detail the builders of the original shingle-style homes took, which is hard to find these days.

It's a very energy efficient home, Dixon—who is a member of the Green Building Council—notes, that was built with large windows and French doors to take advantage of the cooling breezes off the lake rather than air-conditioning. The orientation and expanses of glass also allow the house to take advantage of significant passive solar heat gain on sunny days in the winter months when the low angle of the sun allows its rays to penetrate into the interior, that is shielded from the heat of the over-head summer sun by south facing porches and generous roof overhangs.

There are four working fireplaces in the house—a small one in the dining area of the kitchen, a generous hearth, mantle and fieldstone chimney in the living room, one each in the master-suite and the large guest suite. Dixon chose a variety of woods for flooring, from the mahogany decking on the porch, to the stained pine in the master and guest suites, to the hickory in the living room. This variation adds to the feel of the house as something put together from different sections and at different periods.



THE VIEW courtesy of James Dixon Architect

Window placement was carefully thought out. As in many original shingle-style buildings, priority was given to how the windows would look from inside, how they would serve the rooms where they were located, provide light and set-off the views, rather than being dictated by any exterior pattern or slavery to symmetry.

A small window fairly high up on the wall in the east guest suite, for instance, frames a precise vignette of nearby trees, the surface of the lake and the distant shore. It's not an expansive panorama, but rather a miniature (whose composition changes as you move around the room) that a landscape painter might have selected. In the master suite bathroom, a wall of mullioned windows that runs from the top of the wainscoting to the ceiling lets the morning sun stream in and opens onto a view of the field to the east of the house and beyond, to Pat's Peak, reminiscent of a Wyeth landscape.

The kitchen is a floor below and closer to the lake, opening onto the porch to the south, and catching that beautiful early eastern sun, while being shaded from the hot midday light by the porch, and in the evening by the bulk of the house itself. The master bedroom above has a large bank of windows and French doors that overlook the lake and open to a roofed balcony above the porch. This configuration allows the room to fill with light filtered through the trees and reflected off the lake's surface, while shading it from the hot summer sun.

The porch, in keeping with the principles of the Arts & Crafts movement out of which shingle-style

grew, is designed as a real, functional “room” of the house, blurring the distinctions between inside and outside, between the house and its surroundings. This usefulness is emphasized by a fireplace built into the exterior of the chimney that serves the living room, that invites the the family to linger around its hearth in a sort of “open-air living room” into the cool evening hours.

There are many large windows and glass paneled doors that connect the interior of the house to the porch on the south and west sides, and to the yard and the lake beyond. The natural surroundings and the site are a presence in the house from almost every room—not in the exposed and stark fashion of 1950s “glass box” houses or their modern successors, but with thoughtfully placed and proportioned windows and doors that mediate between interior and exterior, each enhancing the other, while preserving a sense of shelter, privacy and protection.

The building is most open to the south and east sides where there are no near neighbors and more shielded on the north—toward the street—and the west—towards an adjoining residential property. The set-back from the lake-front insures that that passing boaters won’t feel like an intrusion, while being near enough to keep a close eye on younger members of the family playing along the shore.

It’s a well-planned building, with the needs and lifestyle of the owners expressed both esthetically and practically in the final design. Dixon has adapted signature elements of shingle-style design into an energy-efficient, low-maintenance dwelling that is roomy without being cavernous, idiosyncratic without becoming precious. It is a comfortable home that fulfills its design parameter of looking and feeling like a vintage house

without sacrificing the comforts, conveniences and technological advances of modern building practice and contemporary lifestyle.

It is just the latest in a number of projects in various architectural vernaculars designed by Dixon and his firm. You can see a portfolio of his work including pictures of the Lake House at www.JDixonArchitect.com. You can reach his Chatham office at 518-392-6800.

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