



DESIGNING

Team Building

HOW YOUTH, IDEALISM, AND ENTHUSIASM WERE CHanneled INTO ONE EXCEPTIONAL HOUSE.

BY WILLIAM MORGAN

Little Compton, Rhode Island, is one of those special places that one hesitates to write about for fear of revealing the secret. Just across the Sakonnet River from Newport, it's a town with working farms, a commercial fishing harbor, open fields that run down to the sea, and summer people in search of pastoral beauty instead of a social scene.

In recent years, a few houses designed by famous architectural firms such as William Rawn Associates and Arquitectonica have been built here without much fanfare. Far more modest, and so perhaps more interesting, is the small home and studio designed and constructed by a group of recent architecture-school graduates.

The owners, artists Bronlyn Jones and Robert Bauer, had grown up in rural Iowa, though neither had looked back when they left home for art school—Jones to Boston's School of The Museum of Fine Arts and Bauer to Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. When, years later, the couple decided to exchange their urban lifestyle for country living, they had been living in a loft in Jamaica Plain.

Captivated by Little Compton during an exploratory drive around Rhode Island, they





SIMPLICITY WITHIN The view from the sleeping loft takes in the glass corner, which opens up the wall to the outside and invites nature in. The polished-concrete floor is inexpensive yet elegant. Facing page: The house is a quiet and unobtrusive presence on the wooded lot, where mature trees provide privacy.



IN THE DETAILS The master bath (above, left) is connected to the loft bedroom by a dressing room (right). Below: The studio wing is clad in cement-board panels, and the two sets of clerestory windows demarcate the owners' separate spaces within. The entrance gives access to both living and working wings; the gravel drive is an environmentally friendly choice, and all utilities are underground.



LESS IS MORE The minimal aesthetic extends to the galley kitchen and the dining area. Utilities, storage, and a bathroom are behind the kitchen wall. Below: The artist/owners, Brontyn Jones and Robert Bauer, in their light-filled living room.



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chose this oasis of calm for their new home. They rented an apartment in South Providence, giving them a base to pursue their building project. Meanwhile, their new landlord, Caleb Messier, had left a job with an architectural firm to renovate the two-family house where he lived and rented space to the couple.

The couple was so impressed with Messier's work that when they found 2-plus wooded acres in Little Compton, they asked him to design a house for the site. When local builders' estimates were too high, Messier suggested that a group of friends, all recent graduates of Roger Williams University, do the construction. So Messier, his partner, Karen Hughes, and lead builder Shawn Harris of Adaptive Craft, and subcontractors Todd Strunk, Jeremy Broderick, and Joshua Fogg, now the design-build team known as Sixteen on Center, devoted a year to building the 1,700-square-foot house.

Youth, idealism, and enthusiasm were channeled into exceptionally thoughtful construction. Everyone involved wanted to do his very best, so there were no shortcuts, and architects who prefer swinging hammers to sitting in offices created a beautifully crafted dwelling. Bauer and Jones refer to the project as one great collaborative, a positive experience they say was like a community barn-raising. And, like a good barn, the house is absolutely right in scale and proportion.

Sheltered by a single pitched roof, the studio wing is wrapped in dark-gray cement-board panels (galvanized steel was too expensive) secured with stainless-steel fasteners. The cement board (shipped from Germany and cut into panels in Wareham) seemed a

compromise at first. Yet the attached panels float away from the wall, allowing water to drain out of the bottom, while their anthracite color makes the studio visually stand apart. The living-area wing is sheathed in cedar clapboards from the Czech Republic.

The gentle pitch of the standing-seam roof gives the house a shedlike, utilitarian appearance. Because the slope of the studio roof is toward the house, water is channeled into a lead-coated copper drain that projects a couple of feet over the entry porch, creating a delightful minimalist gargoyle.

Inside, the open plan is reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses, with changes in ceiling height shaping movement through the space. Like those triumphs of inexpensive domestic design, the house has poured-concrete floors with radiant heat. The kitchen-dining area is beneath the sleeping loft, while the living area is two stories high, with corner windows that look out on groves of mature holly trees. The house features clean-lined furniture (Charles Eames chairs and Alvar Aalto stools, for example) and expanses of unadorned white walls. Light and views of the woods provide the decoration.

There is no superfluous ornament inside or out. This understated, unassuming, and satisfying house, like the best vernacular buildings of New England, is no more and no less than what it needs to be.

William Morgan, a Providence-based architecture writer, discovered Little Compton as an 8-year-old. E-mail him at william.d.morgan.66@alum.dartmouth.org.

