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Simple homes often feature timeless and practical design, a functional form and floor plan, an open and uncomplicated interior, little ornamentation in details and finishes and multi-purpose rooms that take advantage of natural light and ventilation.
 Photo by Randy O'Rourke/courtesy of The Taunton Press

Simplicity itself

"In character,
in manner,
in style,
in all things,
the supreme
excellence is
simplicity."

— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



Built-in drawers and closets are one way to use space that otherwise might be overlooked. Photo by Charles Mayer/courtesy of Jill Neubauer Architects

By Terry Ward Libby

WHEN VICKI LEFEVRE AND HER HUSBAND, GERRY FINE, WERE LOOKING TO BUILD A SUMMER PLACE ON THE CAPE, THE BROOKLINE COUPLE HAD SOMETHING SIMPLE IN MIND.

"My original idea," says LeFevre, "was to build a beach shack."

The image lingered from many summers they had spent in Woods Hole, an easy drive from the Boston area. LeFevre's parents were students at the Marine Biology Laboratory in Woods Hole during the 1940s, and the area became part of the family's shared history. They returned there during summers while LeFevre was growing up, a tradition she continues today.

So, in 2007, LeFevre and Fine commissioned architect Jill Neubauer of Falmouth



A contemporary design in this kitchen makes use of corrugated metal as a counterpoint to the wood and metal palette of the room, which is brightened by natural light and bright red tiles. Photo by Randy O'Rourke/courtesy of The Taunton Press

to design a new home on a long but very narrow parcel of land perched above Little Harbor in Woods Hole. The site had a panoramic southwesterly water view, overlooking Nashon Island.

The house that evolved from their collaboration with Neubauer is one that she says she never could have imagined, yet it

has all the fundamental “beach shack” elements she wanted, and more.

Neubauer’s design was inspired by seaside boathouses and bungalows. The central living spaces open onto a series of surrounding decks that overlook the harbor. The decks are supported by underlying cantilevers, says LeFevre, and the effect

is like standing on the prow of a ship — a nice touch for a coastal home: simple, but rich with imaginative associations.

The primary living area is separated from the dining area not by walls, but by a freestanding fireplace, which helps to define the two spaces but does not impede movement between them.



A Scandinavian-inspired yellow door adds a splash of color to an entryway and dining area — and gives a visual break from the vertical lines of the siding used in the walls and ceiling. Randy O'Rourke/courtesy of The Taunton Press
 Wooden hooks give the sense of a home in harmony with nature. Charles Mayer/courtesy of Jill Neubauer Architects
 Mugs arranged on a wooden shelf are both practical and decorative. Photo by Amy Cutrona/courtesy of Jill Neubauer Architects

Organic materials have been used throughout: floors are covered with cork, and countertops are made of custom concrete slabs. Everything is highly durable and easily maintained, including the uncomplicated furnishings and decorative touches, most of which were selected with Neubauer's help, says LeFevre. The family takes the greatest pleasure in the house during holiday gatherings, and on those summer weekends when the house is full of visitors, its doors and windows open to the deck, and the salt air drifts in on warm ocean breezes.

"Simple design is thoughtful design, and it is an inherent element of Cape Cod

"To live well, one has to edit. This is more important than having the perfect home or the loveliest architecture."

— Jill Neubauer

style," says Neubauer. "Any style of architecture, any size home, can help us to live more simply, if we are willing to edit and to

organize. People are happier when their lives are in order and not overloaded. To live well, one has to edit. This is more important than having the perfect home or the loveliest architecture."

Neubauer's firm specializes in green design and the use of sustainable building materials, for both newly built homes and for renovations. Her work is characterized by a mix of rustic and modernist elements and fits

into no particular genre or vernacular style but rather borrows from many, to create wholly original designs.

Simplifying, in architectural terms, explains Neubauer, means eliminating extraneous features, things like the formal dining room that is rarely used, and the front door that is never entered by guests — these are remnants of lifestyles of the past.

"People are now more comfortable with letting go of older, sentimental design elements that are really baggage from a different era," says Neubauer. Simplified lifestyles call for practical, utilitarian design elements like built-in storage units located throughout the home, which are easily accessed by every member of the family, including children. Circulation through the house should be straightforward, and rooms can be designed for multiple uses, says Neubauer.

"Most Americans long for a simpler life," writes architect/author Sarah Nettleton, in her book, "The Simple Home" (The Taunton



A mudroom provides the ideal way to manage the elements of the out-of-doors before they can reach the interior rooms of the home. At right, a wood stove, utilitarian in design and function, becomes the focal point of this living room. Photos by Randy O'Rourke/courtesy of The Taunton Press

Many years later, “as an architect, I was offered the chance to focus on the question, ‘What is my philosophy?’ I came to understand that simplicity is not a defined style. It is an approach to the design process. Simple design can be different for everyone.”

“We are often drawn to extremes,” says Nettleton, “especially to opulence, because it shows you’ve succeeded, it gives a sense of well-being.” This is why, she says “much of the built environment is about being important, but there is an emotional malaise caused by disconnect from place.” Simple design, she



Press, 2007). “But we have no idea where to begin the editing of complexity.”

In her book, she presents a collection of more than 20 home design projects from around the U.S., in which homeowners teamed with their architects to achieve sophisticated yet simplified designs that “reflect the wisdom of good choices” and demonstrate that “simple design is both practical and beautiful.”

Simplicity is not to be confused with “monastic austerity or cold minimalism,” says Nettleton. Simple designs can include a wide range of stylistic possibilities, and can be adapted to suit a wide variety of personal tastes. Her point is amply demonstrated by the houses depicted in her book,



which range from a sleek, modern Brooklyn townhouse, to a beautifully restored, 150-year-old Creole cottage in Louisiana.

Nettleton believes that “learning to appreciate the luxury of enough” is key to achieving and sustaining a simpler home, and a simpler life. Though she now bases her architectural practice in Minnesota, Nettleton spent childhood summers at a lakeside camp in Maine, where the family had no electricity, cooked on a woodstove and commuted using a canoe. Par-

ing life back to the bare essentials, she learned early on, enhanced the “simple luxury” of rare pleasures, like “the lap of waves or the trill of birds,” and “seeing a starry night sky on the way to bed.”

says, is about “living on a human scale.”

To achieve that, it is essential to practice “editing,” as Cape-based designer Anthony Fife, owner of Abode Interiors, describes the process, echoing Neubauer’s emphasis. It is key to simplified design, he says.

Generally, “when we decorate, we (tend to) keep adding,” says Fife, when instead “we should select carefully. When every element of a home’s architecture screams, ‘Look at me,’ we are overwhelmed, and the same is true for interior spaces.”

Large patterns and furniture, or accessories with domineering silhouettes, can be jarring, says Fife, who feels that “negative space” is an important part of any interior design scheme. This space in a room is not intended to be occupied but is designed instead to be visually appealing when viewed from other angles in the room or from other vantage points within the home.



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Throw pillows substitute for a roomful of furniture and draw attention to the view beyond the windows. Built-in drawers beneath the sofa/window seat provide additional storage. Photo by Randy O'Rourke/courtesy of The Taunton Press Bottom, the dogs are the most elaborate ornamentation of a door, as they lounge in the sun on a welcome mat. Opposite, a mammoth fireplace, stone walls and a wide-plank floor create the atmosphere of a centuries-old wine cellar in this Chilmark basement. Photo courtesy of Jill Neubauer Architects



“Simplicity and repose are the qualities that measure the true value of any work of art.”
 – Frank Lloyd Wright

Fife recommends juxtaposing rustic pieces with polished ones. “This allows you to appreciate each item in its own right,” he says. “Too much embellishment is simply overwhelming.”

“I’m a big believer in less is more,” says Madeleine Bickert, an interior design specialist and owner of Décor Rx in Brewster. “There’s a growing awareness of the importance of interior spaces and the emotional and psychological impact they have on us. An uncluttered home feels much more serene.”

The growing interest in green living and sustainability, too, has inspired a trend toward simpler interior design choices for the home, she says. “I do believe they are linked, and I do think it’s on the rise,” she says. The trend appears to be “generational, and especially strong among 30-somethings.”

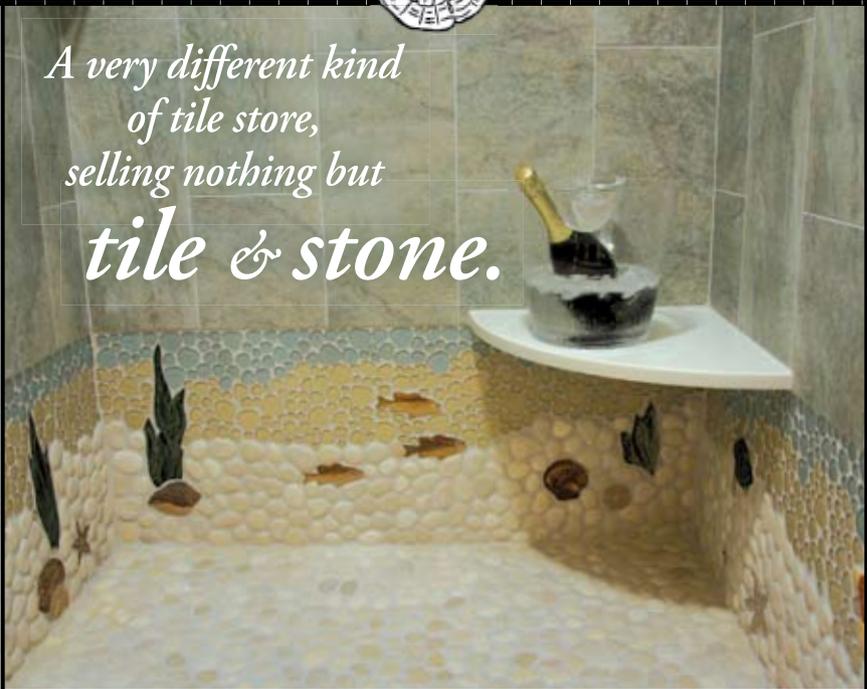
Simple design and minimalistic décor can be a “great fit” for vacation homes, Bickert says. Covering windows with low-maintenance roller blinds, for example, is an alternative to the more elaborate, layered window treatments that are better suited to a more formal year-round home.

Or, consider interior accessorizing changes that free up time and make the daily routine more flexible. Beds covered with carefully arranged throw pillows take time to make tidy and attractive in the morning, and you might be willing to put the energy into that at your year-round home off-Cape. But at a summer cottage, it’s probably better to stick with simple throws and cut down on the number of pillows, saving not only precious minutes but also dollars.

Likewise, Bickert urges her clients to

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The 6 paths to simplicity

Simple is enough

◆
Simple is thrifty

◆
Simple is flexible

◆
Simple is timeless

◆
Simple is sustainable

◆
Simple is refined

think in terms of simple displays of artwork to achieve a feeling of cleaner lines and clearer, more open and inviting space.

“Invest in one or two large pieces that reflect a Cape Cod theme and fit the scale of your walls,” she says. “The eye can’t focus on many pieces simultaneously.”

Clearly, living simply has much to do with the ongoing process of revising our lives and fine-tuning our instincts for separating the essentials from the superfluous, or, Nettleton says, learning to revel in “the luxury of enough.”

Architect Neubauer has a favorite photo, taken inside a vacation cabin she designed for a Vermont family. In it, a young girl sits on a cushioned bench at a rustic wooden table, absorbed in a book. In the center of the table is a simple vase of wildflowers. A ray of soft, golden sunshine falls across the scene.

“The picture depicts the best of everything that is simple,” says Neubauer. “Comfort, beauty, function, and some sentimentality, yet it embodies such richness. It embodies perfection.” ◆



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