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PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

An architect on a budget elevates a '70s Cape Elizabeth bungalow to serve as her family's Maine residence

BY KATY KELLEHER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRETA RYBUS

As so often with coastal properties, it was the view that sold Jocelyn Dickson on the house. Dickson was moving north to Maine with her musician husband, Graham Dickson, leaving behind their previous apartment in New York City. Dickson is a licensed architect, which meant she wasn't daunted by the neglected state of the 1970s shingle-sided structure, nor was she going to dither about drafting dozens of plans. She acted decisively. "I had a vision," she says. "To me, it was just obvious. I had to open up that room."

Working with builder Matt O'Brien of O'Brien Wood and Iron in Portland, Dickson commenced a gut renovation in 2018. The first order of business was to change the structure and flow of the second floor, linking the area she calls the "sunroom" (located above the garage) to the rest of the living spaces. "It's just a spectacular space, with all those windows and the view to the ocean," she says. "It's far and away the best view in the house." The home had been designed and built by the former owner, and while Dickson liked certain elements of the quirky building, she thought the floor plan and the spiral staircase were both in need of an update. At the time she began the project, Dickson was pregnant, and she was well aware that a "teeny spiral staircase, almost like you'd see on a ship" wouldn't be terribly easy for a toddler to navigate. "It wasn't very functional," she says. "We took that out and reworked the circulation and locations of the staircase."

When architect Jocelyn Dickson bought this home, it was a shingle-sided '70s structure with a less-than-optimal floor plan. While she kept a few of the original windows, most of them needed to be replaced.



The staircase that O'Brien created is both functional and beautiful, acting as a passageway between the main living areas and the bedrooms upstairs, and a work of art in its own right. It features a floor-to-ceiling geometric "screen" of red cedar that recalls Japanese kumiko lattice-work. "It was really fun for my guys to be able to put their skills to the test working on something like that," says O'Brien. "The success of the project all stems from good design." However, he notes that the carpenters did have to solve one major problem: they had to figure out a way to anchor the screen in place. "You can't have it falling over when someone leans on it, but you also don't want screws everywhere," he says. They used toenailed screws inserted into the framing that had been installed in the roof, coupled with red cedar wood plugs, to hide the damage. "In a perfect world, maybe there

would have been a different anchoring system where you can see absolutely nothing, but this was the best and cheapest way we could figure out," O'Brien says. "And you would never notice unless you're told to look for it."

Dickson knew from the start that this build would have its challenges and imperfections. That was part of the appeal. "The house allowed me to test out some ideas and materials that I wanted to use," Dickson explains. "I was able to be more experimental." As she's lived in the home, she's come to appreciate the "dynamic" nature of that stairwell. "It's different in daylight and darkness, and it changes depending on the angle. Sometimes you can see right through it, sometimes it's opaque wood. It's always interesting." Clearly, the experiment has been a success: she's since done several similar designs for clients.

The old layout had a small spiral staircase serving as the main connector between floors (above). "It wasn't very functional," says Dickson. The new staircase is much easier to navigate for her toddler son (opposite). To add visual interest, Dickson designed this red cedar screen. "We looked at a lot of samples with O'Brien Wood and Iron," says Dickson. "The red cedar felt like a really nice combination with the white oak floors and the stained red oak. I like pairing different materials, but they need to have enough difference for it to work."





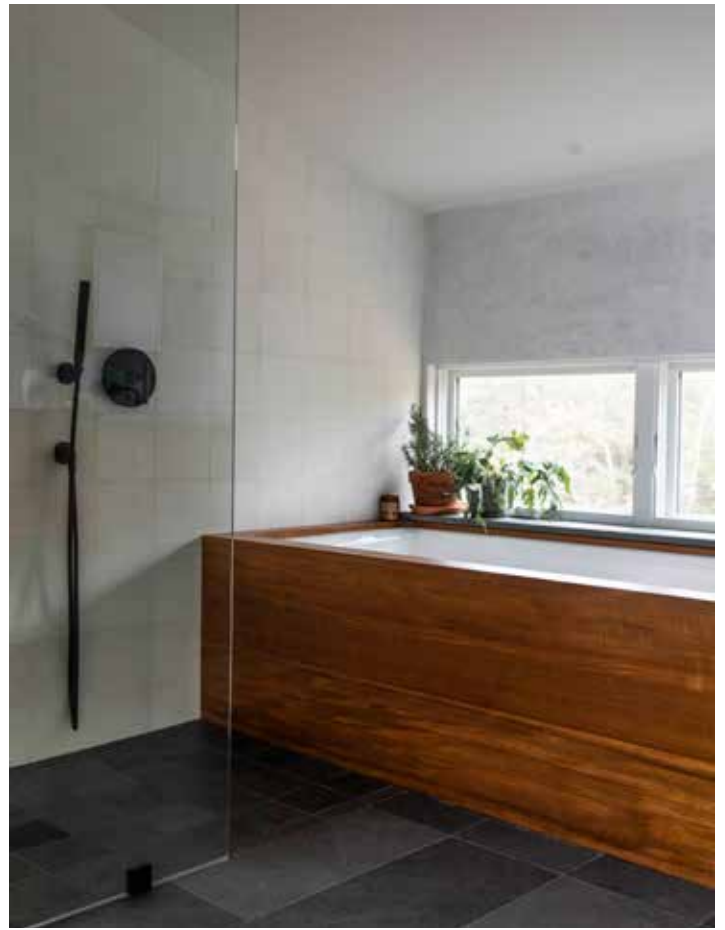


The reddish wood of the screen is a bit of an anomaly in the home. Dickson wanted the rest of the space to have a minimalist, subtle color palette of cool grays and soft browns. “There are a lot of white walls, but we combine those white walls with warmer and more natural materials, like the wood floors,” she says. “The staircase is the central core of the house. We’re always moving around that, and the red cedar brings so much warmth to a very white space.” Outside, Dickson replaced the deep brown shingle siding with eastern white cedar planks that were grown and milled in Maine, and which will fade to “that lovely silver patina color that cedar gets,” she says. This decision was also “incredibly cost-effective. Clear cedar can be expensive, but this knotty cedar is less so. I love the warmth and texture of knotty cedar.” Although it’s currently a creamy, yellowish-brown,

Dickson is well aware that this will change naturally with exposure to sea air.

The floors, however, needed some chemical help to shed their yellowish and pinkish tints. While some of the floorboards were going to be brand-new, others were still perfectly functional. They just didn’t match. “When you remove walls, you will always see that joint. So we decided to replace those areas with new white oak,” Dickson says. She chose ten-inch-wide planks with a white stain to “lighten it up” and remove any odd undertones. As a cost-saving measure, they kept the existing red oak floors in the bedrooms, the main floor, and the lower living area. “To create a better match between the red and the white, we did a combination of bleaching and staining,” she adds. This was a somewhat experimental treatment for Dickson—and for O’Brien’s team. “It wasn’t an easy process,” he

Before, the fireplace opened down to the basement and was occupied by a single fan. The Dicksons closed off the fireplace and painted over the red brick (opposite). Since this photo was taken, they’ve installed a woodburning stove to provide a bit of extra warmth in the sunroom. In their new living room (above), Graham finally has space for his family’s grand piano. It sits alongside a Noguchi paper lantern, which pairs well with their original Eames lounge chair. Although the couples’ style is fairly contemporary, they’re both drawn to midcentury modern pieces and enjoy the occasional antique.





says. "But the overall effect really worked." It's not a perfect match, but it doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to feel good, and for Dickson, it does. "It's tonally connected, and from a sustainability perspective, it was nice to be able to save those planks," she says.

One thing not worth saving was the emerald green carpet that ran "all the way up to the jacuzzi" in the owners' suite. "It was wild," she says with a slight tone of respect for the previous inhabitants' bold decisions. However, she wanted to create a space that's less stimulating, even "spa-like." The budget-conscious selection of painted white pine worked for this particular area, she says, because it's a much less trafficked realm than the downstairs. "People don't like pine because it's softer, but I think it works well here." They installed similarly subdued slate floors downstairs in the mudroom but chose

a slightly punchier green and blue geometric pattern for the hall bathroom, located near their toddler son's bedroom and the guest room. The wall tiles in both bathrooms were sourced from the same Windham shop, Exclusive Tile and Marble. "They're handmade from cement, and they have a lovely irregular quality," says Dickson. Underneath both the slate and tile floors, they opted for electric heating, which is "incredibly functional" in the mudroom (it helps dry wet boots and coats) and "so nice from a comfort perspective" in the bathrooms.

Comfort and ease were two factors at the forefront of Dickson's mind throughout the design-build process. After all, she was going to live in this house. She needed a home that would please her aesthetic sense and work for her growing family. When asked about her professional ethos, she describes herself as a

(Opposite, clockwise from top left) The hallway bathroom is located near the son's room; to add a bit of brightness, Dickson selected geometric tiles and a birchwood vanity. In the owners' suite, a teak-enclosed tub and a "stark" color palette give the space a "spa-like quality," says Dickson. In this bedroom, the white painted floors and the way that the pine texture comes through was a bit of a happy accident that Dickson loves, saying it looks more like a stain than a paint. In her son Zephyr's room, Dickson introduced a few more colors and textures; the rag rug was a gift from her mother-in-law, who purchased it in Morocco. The kitchen (above) features cabinets from IKEA upgraded with funky fronts from Reform, a Danish company that serves as a secret weapon for many architects. The countertops are made from recycled paper. "It's called Richlite," says Dickson. "I hadn't used it before, but I like how it worked out."



“humanistic modernist.” She says, “My sensibility is contemporary. Minimal, with clean lines.” She notes that it isn’t the “international style of minimalism” that relies on glass, steel, and concrete (and thus can skew rather cold) but a “warmer kind of modernism. To me, it is very much in the Scandinavian tradition.”

To keep a space visually and literally clean, you need storage. For their son, the couple bought several long, low, Montessori-inspired cubby shelves and baskets. He’s able to keep toys in his bedroom as well as in the sunroom, where the family spends most of their time. Since it’s off the kitchen, the family inevitably finds themselves hanging out in that area, enjoying the view and sometimes a movie at night. Instead of a television, they use a projector that casts onto a pull-down screen installed above the large windows. This allows the family

to sit on the couch and bask in the warmth of their newly installed woodburning stove. “Since the sunroom is above the garage, it can be the coldest room in the house,” says Dickson. “We painted the brick of the fireplace white, and since the chimney had never been used before—I don’t know why—we put in a stove for supplemental heat.”

The sunroom also gets a good deal of use when guests come over. To add seating, Dickson designed a deep bench that runs along the windows parallel to the couch. She’s recently added cushions, making it an “extra cozy space” for socializing. Another thoughtful touch is the nook that Dickson designed in her son’s bedroom. “Right now, we have it set up with a little tepee in it and some rugs, blankets, and a sheepskin. Someday, when he’s older, we might add built-ins there, too.”

The footprint of the house didn’t change at all, but the exterior did (above). Eastern white cedar from Yoder’s Sawmill replaced the old shingles and the deck got a new railing from O’Brien’s team. To work from home, Dickson created this office space in her room (opposite).





While they purchased some items specifically for this house, the couple was able to furnish the space with a thoughtful mixture of antiques and newer pieces, including heirlooms from both sides of their family tree. A particularly striking piece came from Graham's grandparents: their grand piano now has a place of honor in the living room. "Graham knew he wanted that piano for a long time, but he couldn't take it because we didn't have the space, so it sat in storage in Boston," says Dickson. "It's pretty special to have it here." From her family's side, Dickson brought a credenza, an armoire, and a set of Breuer Cesca dining chairs. They were lucky enough to get a hand-me-down original Eames lounge chair with an ottoman that had been "just sitting in a family friend's basement," says Dickson. "We were in the right place at the right time for that." It goes

well with the Noguchi paper lantern that casts a cozy light in the living room. Graham's mother is an artist, and she has gifted them several of her works, as did a grateful New York friend who was able to use the Cape Elizabeth house as an escape from the pandemic-wracked city while the Dicksons were away. "It was such a good experience for everyone—they needed to get out for a bit; so did we," she says. The painting, which the artist created during her stay, is just a bonus.

The Dickson family has now been living in the space for a couple of years, and they've not yet tired of its views, both inside and out. For Dickson, the house serves as a testament to her professional skills (she has it listed on her website under "the Algonquin House"). She says, "I'm happy and proud. This house feels modern and minimal, but it's also perfect for us."

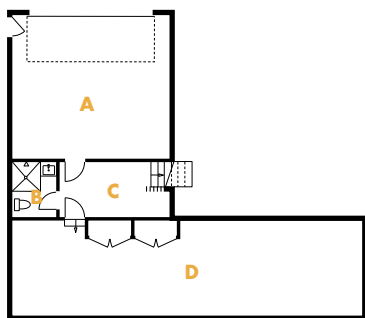
The sunroom (above) is the most well-used space in the house, despite the fact that it has no television. Instead, the family uses a projector screen that pulls down over the windows. The landscape is a work in progress, Dickson says, but she's looking forward to improving the hardscape and bringing in more native plants (opposite). Of the house, she says, "I'm happy and proud."



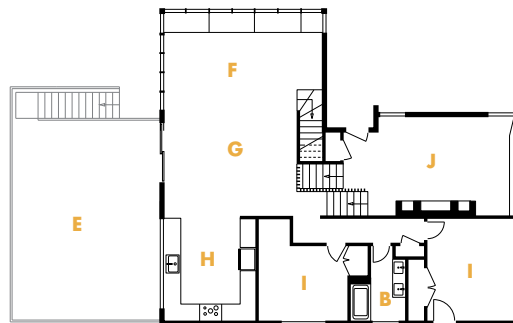
ARCHITECT: JOCELYN DICKSON ARCHITECTURE
 BUILDER: MATT O'BRIEN, O'BRIEN WOOD AND IRON
 LOCATION: CAPE ELIZABETH

- A Garage
- B Bathrooms
- C Mudroom
- D Storage
- E Deck
- F Sunroom
- G Dining Room
- H Kitchen
- I Bedrooms
- J Piano Room
- K Office
- L Owners' Bedroom
- M Owners' Bathroom
- N Attic

BASEMENT



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



ILLUSTRATION: Tim Lohnes