

The Art of Stone Sculpture

Rockland's Rebirth

A Tranquil Inn on Ocean's Edge

Maine HOME + DESIGN

August 2007

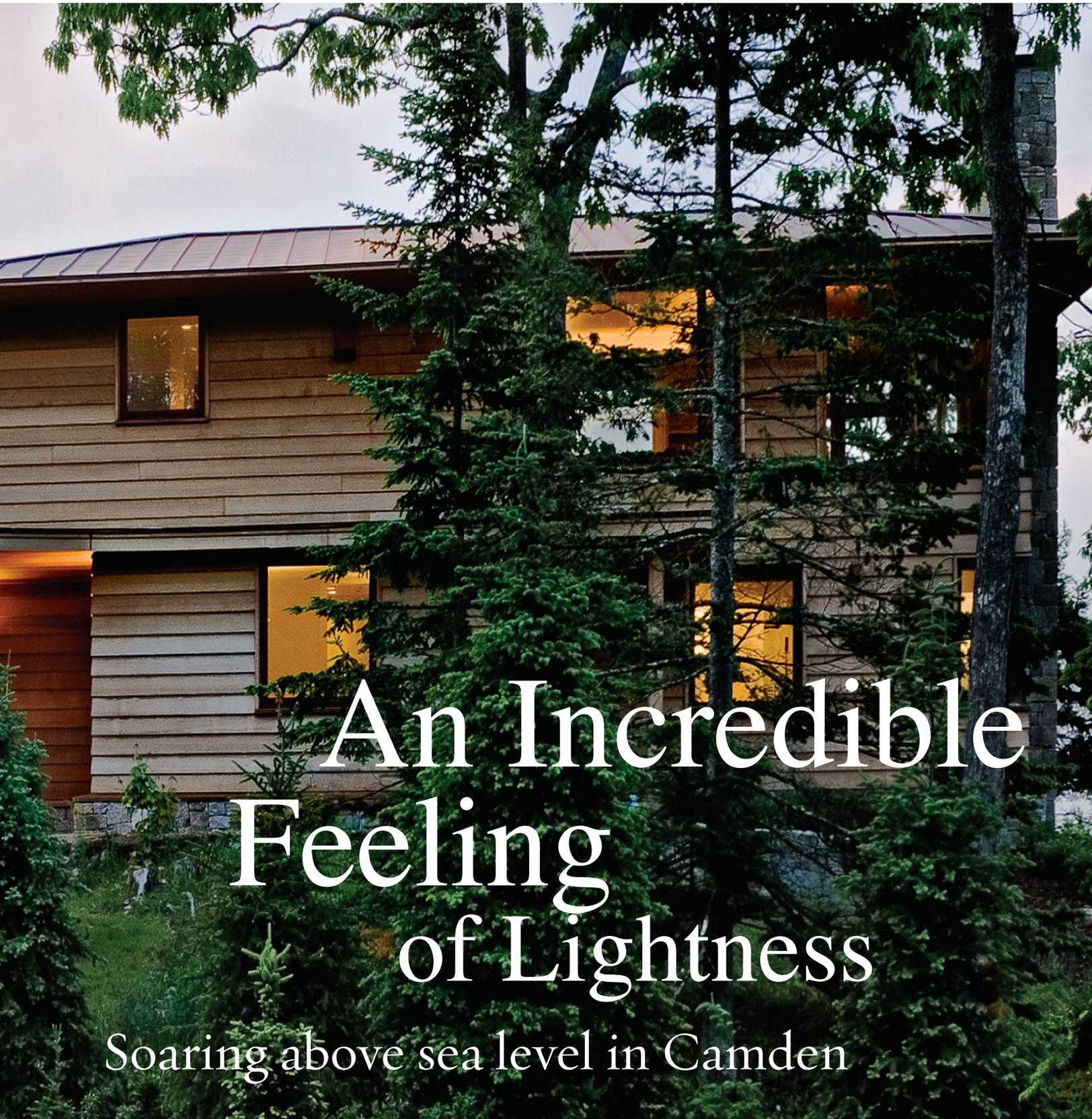
Bar Harbor Farm House
Adrift in a Historic
Beatrix Farrand Landscape

Kennebunkport's
Stone House
The Quintessential
Summer Cottage

+ From Garden to Plate
Organic Fare at
Arrows, Joshua's, Primo



Every house has a reason. An organizing rationale. A why.



An Incredible Feeling of Lightness

Soaring above sea level in Camden

REMARKABLE
by Stephen Abbott
Photography Rob Karosis



The quarried granite blocks used for the living-room fireplace (above) were hand-selected from a stone yard in Bowdoin. Bringing in a touch of the outside world, varicolored bursts of lichen have been left undisturbed.

A second stone fireplace and grill in the enclosed porch (above right) is visible from the kitchen. Overhead cupboards feature glass on both sides, adding to the sense of openness that characterizes the home.



Prelude

But what separates the uncommon house from the common, the exceptional from the serviceable, is how well a design embraces its reason in both concept and execution. Even homes with the most modest of budgets can transcend their means, if only they find the right embrace.

Architect Sam Van Dam, of Van Dam Architecture and Design in Portland, frequently expounds on the subject of creative maturity, for he believes in putting suitability before showiness. He points out that architectural flourishes—the “big moves,” as he calls them—are usually the hallmark of the younger architect. As they mature both personally and professionally, architects recognize that good designs have no need of embellishment.

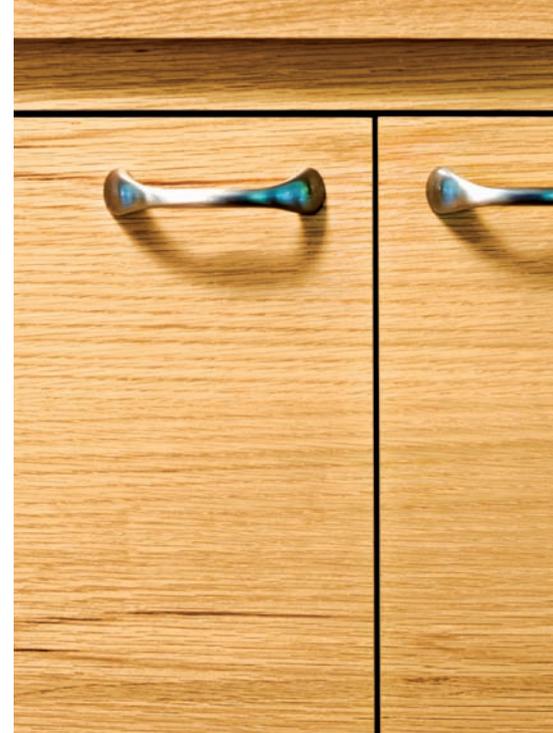
Soaring more than 125 feet above sea level in Camden, a recent Van Dam design is a perfect expression of its reason: an incomparable site overlooking Camden Harbor and Penobscot Bay. Perched on the crest of a densely wooded hill that falls dramatically to the Atlantic shoreline, the design may have been engineered around the ever-changing view, but the house is a testament to permanence.

Arrival

Follow the winding back roads off Route 1 in Camden and you will come to an unassuming driveway that could be anywhere in Maine. A canopy of thick summer foliage throws flickering shadows across the windshield as you make your way toward the house. Easing around a hairpin loop in the driveway, you look up to see the pastel-blue sky filtering through the expansive windows above the front entryway. This detail, like every other in the design, is intentional—they reflect the owner’s desire to blend the house into the land below and the sky above.

Many would define elegance as beauty without ostentation, but true elegance in design is achieved when the extremely difficult is made to seem effortless. After more than 30 years in the business, Van Dam has learned how to make the most architecturally demanding houses appear so authentic and inevitable that they might have sprouted from a planted seed. “We like to talk with clients about the ‘language’ of the house,” Van Dam says, “and I use that word carefully. I dislike the term ‘style.’ Style is temporary and usually superficial. A house’s language, for me, is about its content—not the way it looks. It’s how a house merges use with visual aesthetic.”

Yet the principles of substantive design and the trappings of style are often confused. “People will come up to me after I finish a design or project and ask, ‘What style is that?’” Van Dam says, “and I’ll reply, ‘I don’t really know.’ Our designs are usually a synthesis of a



lot of different ideas.” Since the intersection of personal taste, functional necessity, and individual budget is a complex terrain to navigate, it is unlikely that any one architectural style will satisfy every need. Van Dam and his team prefer not to place restrictions on creativity and instead work in an extensive palette of traditions, influences, and materials.

Still, a design that aspires to do everything risks accomplishing nothing much at all.

Van Dam’s colleague, Paul Attardo, the project architect for the Camden house, describes how prospective clients will come to their firm with piles of clippings from architectural magazines. Although they have no problem identifying what they like, the biggest design challenge is usually the randomness of their selections. “I tell them that if we give you all the images you want, you will end up with a scrapbook,” Attardo says, “but if we give you the essence of all these images, we can create a novel.”

Assimilation

What is most striking about the home is that no single feature stands out more than any other. The entire design—from layout and dimension to color and detailing—is a model of subtle integration. “I have realized,” Van Dam says, “that many small decisions add up to a good design.” It is the accumulative effect of those many decisions that conspire to suffuse the home with an atmospheric sense of refinement. While the average guest may not recognize the level of talent and expertise required to achieve such sophistication, they will hardly fail to register the home’s ambient artistry.

At 3,600 square feet, the house is neither small nor overly large. Like every other aspect of the project, the proportions reflect the theme of appropriateness that threads its way through the design. Jay Fischer of Cold Mountain Builders in Belfast—the company that oversaw the construction process from start to finish—believes that such quality is attained when architect and builder have a strong understanding, not only of the project, but of each other. “I have worked with Sam and Paul Attardo many times in the past,” Fischer says, “and we’ve developed a trusting relationship that works creatively and productively in projects of this complexity.”

While the design provides the conceptual fabric of a home, it is the craftsmanship, materials, and furnishings that knit it all together. In the Camden house, Fischer says, “the continuity of material selections from the exterior to the interior was crucial to the success of the design.” From the red-cedar siding and copper cladding to the white-oak floors and ivory walls, the physical elements are a seamless extension of the concept. “This house responds to its environment right down to the detailing,” Attardo says.

Perhaps no feature in the home captures the harmony of design and execution as

Diffused natural light from the front entryway and second-floor landing (above left) commingles with sun streaming in from the kitchen area’s many windows.

End-matched, white-oak veneers (above right) display a continuous grain across the built-in kitchen cabinets and cupboards. White oak can sometimes have a greenish hue, and aligning the coloration of the wood throughout the home took a great deal of time—and patience.



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well as the abundant built-in casework on display in nearly every room. Using end-matched, white-oak veneers, the European faceless cabinetry and interior doors are continuous in both color and grain. All the custom cabinetry in the kitchen and dining areas was constructed by Ezra Howell of E.H. Fortner Woodworking in Washington, Maine, while the rest of the casework in the bedrooms and living spaces was created by Cold Mountain's cabinetry shop. An extensive search was undertaken to find just the right tone for the white oak, and meticulously aligning the grain in all the contiguous veneers was a demanding and labor-intensive process.



Scene

And then, of course, there is the view.

From the second floor, the towering ocean views inspire a feeling of calmness tinged with elation. The scenes have an almost unreal quality, as if you were gazing not at life itself, but at a life-sized photo on the wall of a European museum. The whole of Camden Harbor seems to be encased in glass, and the billowy treetops swaying in the cool morning breeze beneath the windows might as well be clouds slipping past an airplane in flight. The boats on Penobscot Bay are undefined silhouettes set against the backdrop of the distant shoreline, and the iconic Curtis Island Light is a picture postcard tacked to a field of blue. As if on cue, a gorgeous two-masted schooner moves in near-imperceptible slow motion across the harbor below like a ship in a bottle on painted sea.

"This house has the most spectacular view of any that we have worked on," Van Dam says.

To appreciate the entirety of the design, however, it is necessary to not only soak in the view, but to stroll across the grounds. Granite-slab steps sheathed in a curling stone wall descend from the back door to the crown of long sloping lawn that disappears into scrub and forest. From the lowest point on the property, you look back to see a graceful arrangement of irregular stonework, wide horizontal siding, and thoughtfully placed windows. The once-gleaming copper paneling has faded to a rusty orange-brown and the red-cedar siding has lost some of its original saturation. The exterior materials were chosen for their durability and for their visual continuity with the surrounding environment as they weather naturally over time. The idea was to balance bold design



The bronze railings capped with mahogany (opposite top left) in the interior stairwell do not obstruct either light or lines of sight. “Good architecture is essentially about balancing opposing forces,” Van Dam says. “How do you make a sturdy railing, for example, that doesn’t look heavy or bulky?” He appears to have found an answer.

In the hallway between the first-floor guest bedrooms and the stairwell (opposite top right), visitors will pass by a cross-section of a custom-built wooden sloop. The white-oak interior doors used throughout the home feature deep horizontal grooves, or dados. “To my knowledge,” Jay Fischer says, “Baillargeon, Inc. in Quebec was the only company in North America that was willing to integrate the oak dados into their standard manufacturing process. It took them several tries before they perfected a method that worked for both of us.”

Looking out the front windows from the second-floor landing (opposite below), the perceptive visitor will notice that the exterior red-cedar siding is perfectly aligned with the white-oak board used in the interior stairwell.

A breakfast nook off the kitchen (above) provides a panorama of Camden Harbor. All the windows were custom-built by Loewen in Manitoba, Canada.

The view from the second-floor landing (left) reveals some of the home’s exterior detailing. A quilt of soldered, flat-seam copper plating covers a small roof above the back door. An open-air deck, visible on the far side of the living-room windows, features the same railing design used on the interior stairs.

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From the lawn below the ocean-facing side of the house (above), guests out for a casual amble around the grounds will notice how the granite stonework wrapping around the northern side of the house blends into a prominent rock ledge. The naturally weathered exterior materials accentuate the home's visual continuity with the landscape.

Arriving visitors will see a house nestled within the surrounding forest (left). As few trees as possible were cut down during construction, and the owner's desire to leave the site intact even extended to an old house that was demolished to make way for the new. Sections of the former home's stone foundation, stairs, and walkway (partially visible near the left-front corner of the house) have been incorporated into the stone stairs that ascend to the front door.



A majestic twilit view of Camden Harbor (above right) greets those who leave by the back door for an early evening stroll across the lawn.

An enclosed, tree-shaded porch (bottom right) features a combination fireplace and grill for indoor cookouts. The plentiful windows can be replaced with screens, which turns the porch into a multi-purpose, three-season room.



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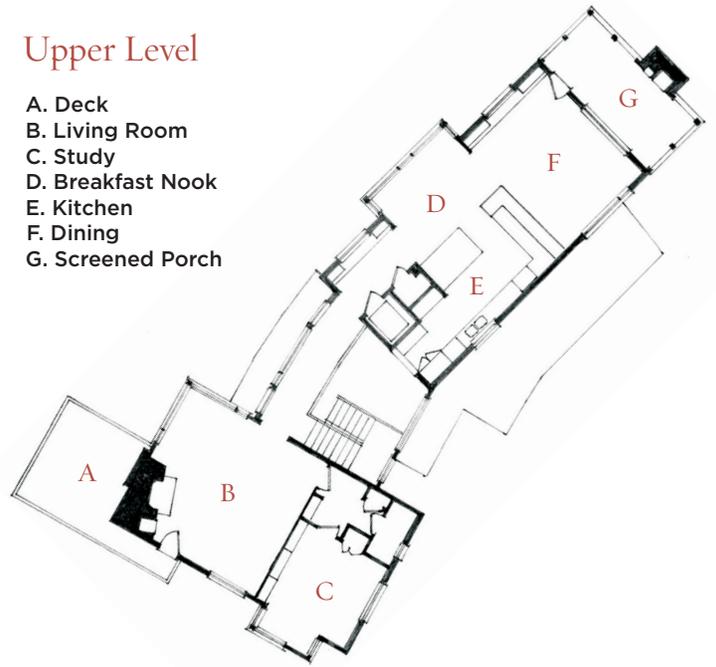
Vertical-grain Douglas fir was used for the soffit (above) and for the ceiling in the enclosed porch. The bold eaves not only help protect the house from the elements, but they also add to the natural shade provided by the neighboring trees. “The owner was drawn to the site and to the Prairie Style roof for a very practical reason,” Van Dam says, “he didn’t want too much sunlight.”

with a reverence for the unsurpassable beauty of the site. “When I was sailing in the harbor the other day, I looked up at the hill and couldn’t find my house,” the owner says. “All the other homes stuck out, but mine was lost in the landscape.”

The organic materials and minimalist landscaping reflect the owner’s mission to preserve as much of the original site as possible: “Most people assume that when you build a house, you need to tear up the site and then landscape it afterward. I rejected that approach.” Everything about the landscaping exemplifies the value of “less is more.” Standing between his home and the adjacent two-car garage, the owner surveys a patch of untouched

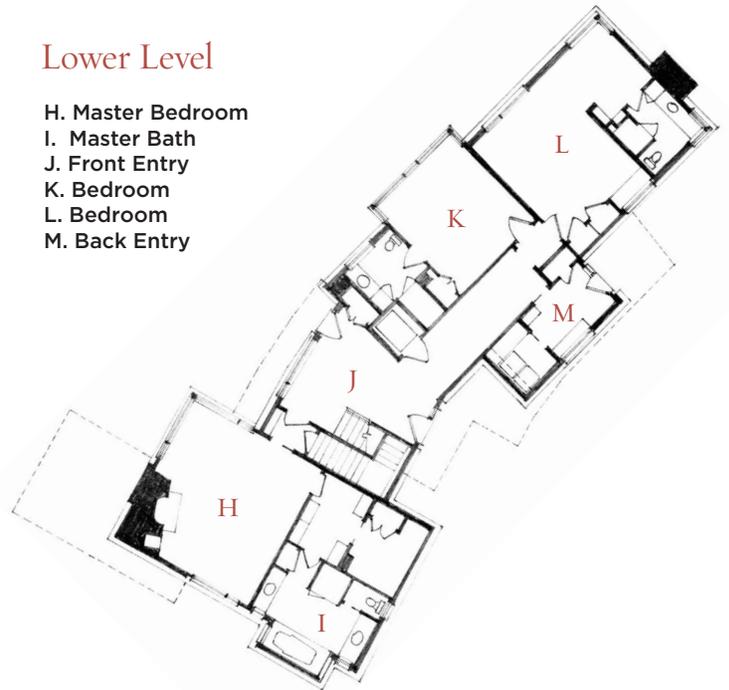
Upper Level

- A. Deck
- B. Living Room
- C. Study
- D. Breakfast Nook
- E. Kitchen
- F. Dining
- G. Screened Porch



Lower Level

- H. Master Bedroom
- I. Master Bath
- J. Front Entry
- K. Bedroom
- L. Bedroom
- M. Back Entry



forest floor. “Look at this right here,” he says with evident pride. “You just can’t recreate this. The natural texture and beauty of the landscape can’t be restored once they’ve been disturbed.”

Finale

As the sun slips below the tree line, a slight evening chill comes on with the dimming light. Standing before his home, the owner watches a light click on within and a wistful look falls across his face.

“When you’re driving up to the house,” he says, “there is just this incredible feeling of lightness.” **MH+D**

MaineHOME+ DESIGN

75 Market Street

Suite 203

207-772-3373

www.mainehomedesign.com

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