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Season of Change

Modern Interpretation (THIS PAGE) The Belgian Bluestone floor in the entry area is through Exquisite Surfaces. The pergola's (OPPOSITE PAGE) heavy proportions and rafters with simplified tails extend the home's clean aesthetic to the outdoors. Main living spaces were placed on the second level to optimize the Sound views. See Resources.



Agents *of* Change

ARCHITECT, DESIGNER AND BUILDER FUSE
MODERN WITH TRADITIONAL
IN A NEW ENGLAND BEACH HOUSE

BY MINDY PANTIEL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WARD FRENCH



RENOWNED ARCHITECT Mies van der Rohe is often credited with saying, “God is in the details.” Like the leader of the Bauhaus movement, designer/developer Leslie Cohen believes meticulous attention to the finest points is what makes a project sing. Intent on building a waterfront cottage like no other, Cohen engaged her architectural and building team in a process that would keep them all seeking the essence of every aspect of the structure throughout the project. “I wanted a modern interpretation with a sense of tradition, but it needed to feel new and fresh,” says Cohen. “That meant lots of editing and the house morphing over and over again until we got it just right.”

After literally purchasing the house next door, her initial intent was to develop and sell the property, but she ended up moving there instead. “It was a building worthy of being torn down,” she recalls about the boxy split-level that was a sore thumb in the coveted locale. “When it came on the market, I jumped at the chance of transforming it,” Cohen says. She then tapped architect Jon Halper and builder Ward French—both known entities from previous projects—to help shape her “New England beach house with a twist.”

The duo started by addressing the challenges related to the property’s steep hillside and proximity to water with plans for a building envelope that included waterproofing technologies selected to withstand rain and wind

Just Beachy Custom kitchen (LEFT) cabinets through Custom Furniture & Design include open shelving and Miele appliances integrated behind panels. The engineered wood floors are from Exquisite Surfaces; the backsplash is made of French hand-cut tiles. In the “beach bathroom” (ABOVE), so named for its proximity to the waterfront, the honed Belgian Bluestone flooring is through Exquisite Surfaces; vanity is custom by Mark Kleinberg Designs. See *Resources*.



Simply Stated (CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE) A vintage light fixture creates a statement above a Mar Silver Design dining table surrounded by Crate & Barrel chairs. Hand-hewn beams and engineered wood floors provide the connective tissue between the living spaces. Living room club chairs covered in Libeco linen are through Circa Antiques; wood coffee tables through Mandarin Collection. In the library, a custom sofa wears a Holly Hunt mohair fabric; sofa pillows are through Bungalow; chaise sofa is covered in a Rogers & Goffigon linen. Ornately carved antique chair is through R.T. Facts. See *Resources*.

Engineering

Feat (THIS PAGE)

Assembled in place piece-by-piece, the complex staircase was a team effort. The oak treads were manufactured from templates in France; the balusters are tapered poplar; and the oak stair railing is notably devoid of goosenecks, which would have impeded the flow of the design. **Past Lives** (OPPOSITE PAGE) Barely imperceptible just below the windows is a subtle reference to crossed porch railings incorporated by the architect in homage to the local vernacular.

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events. “We were actually taking down the existing house when Hurricane Sandy hit, which caused us to raise the new structure an additional foot to create even more of a buffer,” says French.

And while proximity to the Sound raised all kinds of issues, it also drove the overall design. “We needed to plan so the best views were toward the water, but we first had to terrace the hill for both drainage and aesthetics,” says Halper, who placed the primary living spaces on the second floor to maximize the waterfront vistas.

On first inspection, the house has all the earmarks of a typical beach cottage, including simple gable forms, a shed roof and deep overhangs. “If you squint, it looks like classic New England architecture. But up close, it’s very thoughtful and very edited,” says Halper, alluding to touches like the crisp stacked stone in lieu of the usual lumpy field stone that form the pergola’s foundation and rafter tails that went from swooping to more elemental and modern. “It looks under-designed, but it took work to get it to look that way.”

Inside, the floating staircase with its flowing oak handrail looks effortless. “We built the staircase in place section by section,” says French, who employed similar care with the ceiling treatment. “After trying multiple iterations of beams, none of which had the desired color, scale and texture, we created our own version.” The resulting planks feature the joinery and attributes of an older beam, but are unique enough to work with the modern rooms designed with family life in mind.

“I have three children, my partner has two, and they all have boyfriends and girlfriends,” says Cohen, who included six bedrooms and five bathrooms in the 6,000-square-foot floor plan to make it workable for the expanded clan. The kitchen, with its outsized double islands and clean-lined stained oak cabinetry, is all about hanging out. “We can have 75 people in there and not feel crowded,” she adds.

Using a mix of furnishings from her previous house and a few new pieces, Cohen crafted spaces that mimic the home’s overall contemporary meets traditional theme. In the library, an ornately carved antique chair from R.T. Facts looks relaxed alongside a metal table, while a pair of rustic wood benches turned coffee tables add character to the living room. “I wanted things to be casual but interesting,” she says.

Halper and French both credit Cohen’s vision and hands-on approach as being paramount to the project’s success. “The house is unique but it feels familiar. It’s contextual but has an edge,” says the builder. Halper adds, “Leslie pushed the boundaries of materials and details making sure that everything was part of the project’s overall DNA.”

