

*How one couple
found value in the
1990s recession*

BY DUO DICKINSON

Starting Over

Making the McIntyres' new home meet federal regulations involved raising its floor above a mandated level. But to get back down to the beach can be awkward (or at least ugly) — unless that transition is made into a design feature.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Mick Hales

The open living area has its octagonal shape lofted an extra two feet to maximize the full view at the south end of the site.



ATHOME

When Bruce McIntyre called me one snowy winter day in 1993, I thought he was crazy. He said he and his wife Renee might want to buy a home — right in the middle of the last economic recession when many more homes were for sale than there were buyers to be found for them. Sound familiar?

We met in the cold overcast morning to find one of the most promising coastal sites I'd ever seen in my career as an architect, having focused my work on a few hundred families' domestic dreams. "Promising" can be faint praise when it comes to children and homes; in this case the building had been poorly remodeled about a decade earlier. It leaked both rain and freezing air like a sieve, and when I did my due diligence in the basement I

found the kind of dramatic rot that had scared potential buyers away for the past year or two.

The home also suffered from about five decades' worth of tacked-on additions, lowering roof lines (and the windows tucked under them) and decreasing the pitch of a roof that barely kept the often-horizontal rain out of the home. Amid the rolling floors, bits of leftover walls parked themselves in the middle of rooms, making any appreciation of the site a peek-a-boo affair.

As bad as the building was, the site was its opposite. To the south there was a full-blown, 120-degree view of Long Island Sound, to the east nestled a small private beach, to the west arched the line of Hammonasset Beach and to the north lay dozens of acres of pristine salt marsh.

I knew that only a few years before this site would have fetched twice what Bruce and Renee could offer for it. But desperate times call for desperate offers — and

because the McIntyres had to sell their existing home in the same depressed market and I begged them to budget about \$50,000 to stabilize and detox the existing structure, there was no wiggle room. Timing is indeed everything, and not only was their offer accepted, but the McIntyres' house sold for just enough money to allow me to get to work applying some balm to their compromised tent of a home. First order of business was to clean out the rot and stabilize the structure. Leaky roofs were scabbed over and shot sliders were replaced. Those enigmatic wall fragments were transformed into slender columns, brightly celebrated with Renee's irrepressible palette of exuberant colors and fun and funky accoutrements and — *voilà!* Viability for a decade's worth of occupancy. Because these repairs and enhancements also happened in a depressed building climate, the work was done at a relative bargain-basement cost after some careful budgeting.

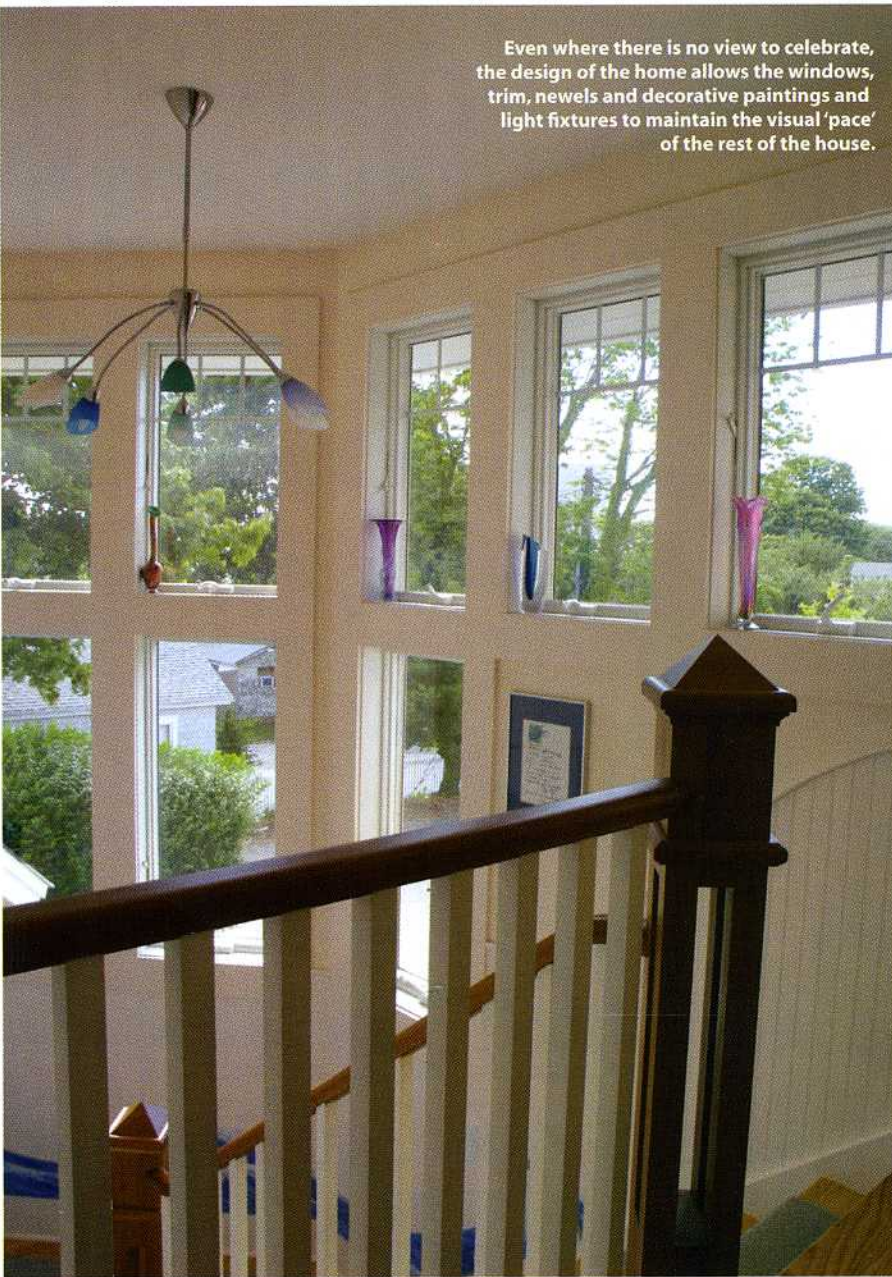
If timing is everything, the three rules of real estate ain't chopped liver either: "location, location, location." These "rules" allowed a dysfunctional house to be tolerable as property values rose over the early years of the 21st century. But no amount of exciting color and decoration could overcome the baking southerly light that stressed out the AC and bleached out all that décor. Patched roofing cannot keep out wind-driven coastal rain forever, and low eaves meant no view for those standing up in the living room. Windows set in place 20 years ago without any overhanging protection cease to keep the weather out, no matter how much caulk is applied.

But rehabbing a coastal property beyond these half measures and stopgaps is no simple matter. Virtually all existing coastal properties older than your kids do not meet present local zoning, state building or federal coastal codes. The rules now mandate that anything beyond the judicious application of bailing wire and chewing gum (and, of course, yet another layer of paint) requires a complete code review of all the aforementioned standards.



The non-ocean-view side of the new McIntyre house, complete with protective rooflets over almost all windows and a venting cupola.

Even where there is no view to celebrate, the design of the home allows the windows, trim, newels and decorative paintings and light fixtures to maintain the visual 'pace' of the rest of the house.



A pre-fabricated metal firebox is surrounded by exotic stone slabs, capped with a mantel of salvaged walnut and its raised hearth is surfaced by heart-shaped stones.

In the go-go era of the last decade's housing feeding frenzy, thousands of aspiring homeowners bootstrapped code-compliance to rationalize endless zoning code variances to create the bloated, looming and frankly ugly boxes that now crowd the coasts of Connecticut (and all the other salt water-worshipping states). In this case the owners "walked the talk" of true sustainability by making a distressed home viable for a full decade. Eventually, though, it just could not be sustained without a major structural overhaul and full surface replacement of siding, roofing, doors and windows, a level of renovation that to meet federal standards would have required raising the house's first floor several feet and creating an entirely new foundation.

At this point even I, a non-native but ardent swamp Yankee, realized that the further salvaging of a terminally flawed box was simply stupid. So four years ago the McIntyres dove in, going through full design and approvals processes involving design fees and months of hearings, which culminated in a bidding exercise during a heated construction climate where finding value was as hard as finding shade on this sun-drenched coastal site.

A comprehensive bidding process to three good contractors netted Waverly Builders — Paul and Jacqui Torecellini of Branford. By breaking down these bids into 40-plus price points the McIntyres could control where they spent and where they didn't. Unlike home buying, bidding for construction should never be "take-it-or-leave-it," no matter where the economy is. Good bidding reveals where to save, spend or plan ahead in any market.

Eaves cost money, and natural wood shingles and decking are also more costly than other materials, as are good windows (vinyl clad with stainless steel hardware). But over time they pay for their added cost and then begin saving money, as painting is limited to trim, and water and sun are held at bay. Extra zones for heating and cooling control do cost more, but six zones, versus the usual two or three for a four-bedroom house like this, save money every day; an occupied room can be cool in winter or warm in summer. A cupola with operable windows provides a flue to vent any heated air as well by limiting the time air conditioning is used.

But the biggest savings are always found in the thoughtful design that allows four bedrooms and a home office to be accommodated in less than 3,400 square feet. Higher ceiling heights make tight

spaces feel larger and can be designed to fit under a zoning code's limitations if you take the time to design a home instead of inflating a plan to the largest envelope possible.

Beyond mere dollars, design allows this exquisite site to be appreciated from every room inside the tightly planned home. The decks and steps that provide physical connection to the sand and surf were awkward in the original home, but with some thought they can provide easier access and show off the view. Design is not a new thing; it's been around since we began to think about building. But in the bygone boom's mindless rush to bloat, elegant design was overcome by greed and ego.

Bruce and Renee McIntyre saw value where ugliness and risk prevented anyone from buying their diamond-in-the-rough site. They knew that ultimately design could maximize the potential of a unique piece of land and at the same time truly reflect their values. Through aggressive bidding to attentive builders, the McIntyres protected their assets despite building during a boom time. That's what anyone can do, no matter how scary the zeitgeist seems.

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Courtesy of the homeowners.

The 'before' that came before the 'after': The original house as the McIntyres found it in the early 1990s