

THE HOUSE AS A WHOLE

Meanings and Intentions

Perched on a hillside amid four large trees, a small (20 × 38 feet) rectangular form achieves grandeur by elevation above the slope. A simple two-story, extruded-gable form swells above a reduced foundation plinth.

The actual broad-stroke detailing of the house—roof pitch, surface detailing, and essential spirit—was keyed to the immediately adjacent Shingle Style house. A positive ambiguity was effected through conscientious referencing without mimicry. Perhaps a retrofitted carriage house, or just a somewhat bizarre architectural offspring, the house creates an implicit entry court by filling in the void between existing house and garage, while being centered on the existing driveway.

The maximum impact is derived by using the swelled, lofty intentions of the house in the most direct manner. A sense of articulation in the context of a prosaic form is achieved by emphasizing the local symmetries of the gable ends while effecting ad hoc facade compositions on the side elevations. The blanket of red cedar shingles covering the exterior is allowed to dominate certain areas of the house, while a white cedar shingle datum around its entire girth and reduced spacing at the south-facade peak violate the continuity just enough to avoid a sense of unrelenting dominance.

The use of a multitude of scales—from the dominant form to unexpectedly large windows to shingle detailing (and all the steps in between)—allows visual excitement to prevail over predictability.

Identities, personal and architectural, come in a variety of sizes. The nature of the small house can constrict the identities of the parts presented by any house. In the Dickinson house the scale differential is exaggerated via the use of broad expanses of shingles, highly varied fenestration, and subsequently sized trim. This creates an articulate dialogue between the simple house form and the necessary violations of the building's envelope.

Internally, spatial identities are reinforced by limiting the intentions. Because 90 percent of the storage space is condensed into two large closets and a small attic, the four remaining rooms are allowed to express themselves without undue stress on the small scale of the house itself.



Photos 12-27 by Mick Hales

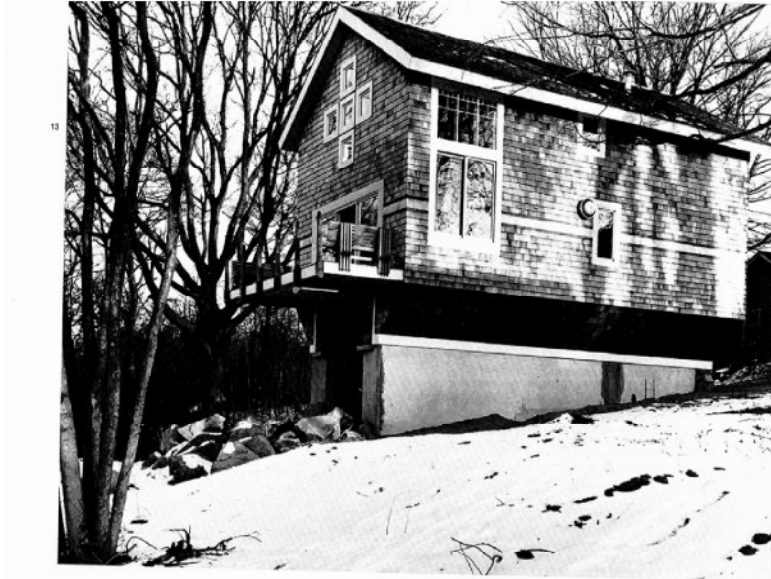


Figure 12 Entry. A centered "face" greets the arriving occupants to be. The entry creates the natural focus for the preceding driveway. (Facing page.)

Figure 13 (above) Northwest. A lifted, extruded gable form is wrapped in cedar shingles to effect a simple, powerful presence. Extreme scalar manipulation of windows helps activate the exterior rhythm, while a continuous band of white cedar shingles act as a datum to all the penetration activity. Note the applied parts of the deck and the outside trim work painted white to contrast with the ubiquitous natural materials.

Figure 14 Entry. The east facade has poor access to the sun and little view, so its form can easily accommodate an expressive stair and entry. Note how the painted tongue-and-groove underbody contrasts with the cedar shingles. The entry stairs are expressively detailed to provide some creative construction in spite of the code-compliant floor height. Note how the exterior deck (higher right) and staircase corner (lower left) both create the sense of an ornamental skin. Extended trim widths, painted joints, and considered door and window locations create an active array of parts amid the sea of cedar.

Figure 15 Bench, exterior. Deck railing serves double duty as a barrier and sight line as an aesthetically active piece opposed to the house's mass. Note the turned hollow used for deck restraint. All materials chosen hold used for deck restraint. All materials used are weather-resistant (redwood, oak, and clear cedar), allowing for a minimum of maintenance.

Figure 16 Bench, from deck. A minimalist composition of parts both restrains and accommodates.



Figure 18 Kitchen and entry view. Simple, inexpensive cabinets are opposed to create a galley kitchen. The axis created between the cabinets centers upon the front door and orients the radiator and window as well. Teak counters and a custom range hood enliven the entry vantage.

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Figure 19 Living room, west. This ensemble of openings is the visual greeting the house provides once the occupant proceeds over the threshold. The westerly tall window is a duplicate of the window first apprehended upon access to the site. Made from a standard slide below and custom fixed unit above, the glazing division mimics the tree form opposite it, while the window's shape captures both the intense sunsets and the tree's ascendancy. The horizontal slider affords an uninterrupted sweep of the salt-marsh view. The cluster of square clerestory windows above (which forms a cruciform when fully depicted) is a centered array providing both ambient light and ventilation. The vertical, horizontal, and centered fenestration provide a minor-league compendium of the orientations possible in any glazing system. Note the tie-rod orientation to the west window, which in turn is oriented to the fireplace opposite, creating a minor subaxis.



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Figure 20 *Fireplace. The least expensive fireplace available is made special by applied parts. Note the orientation of the tie-rods to the chimney. The fireplace is the single major formal event within the living room, counterpointing the outscaled space. Note that the windowless easterly wall provides a blank background for these activities.*

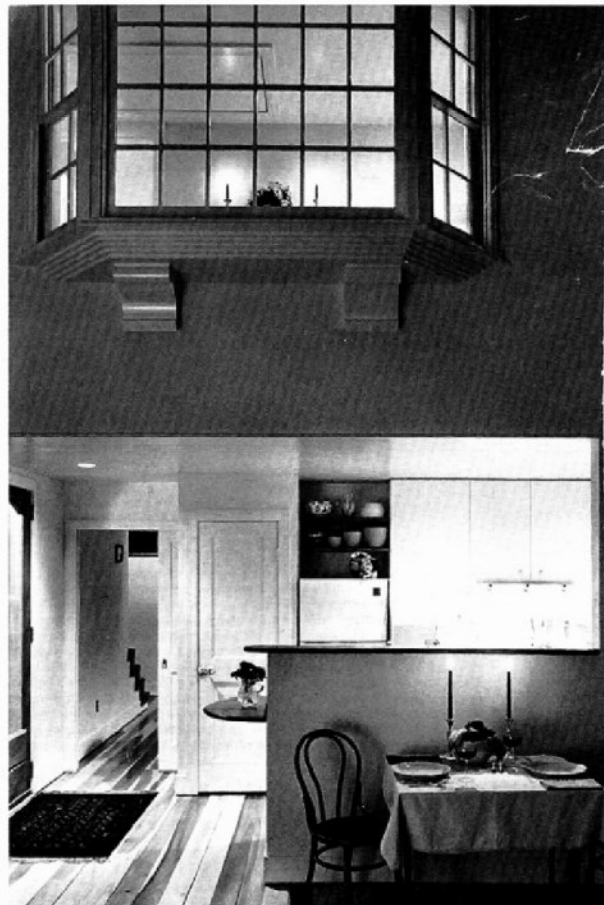
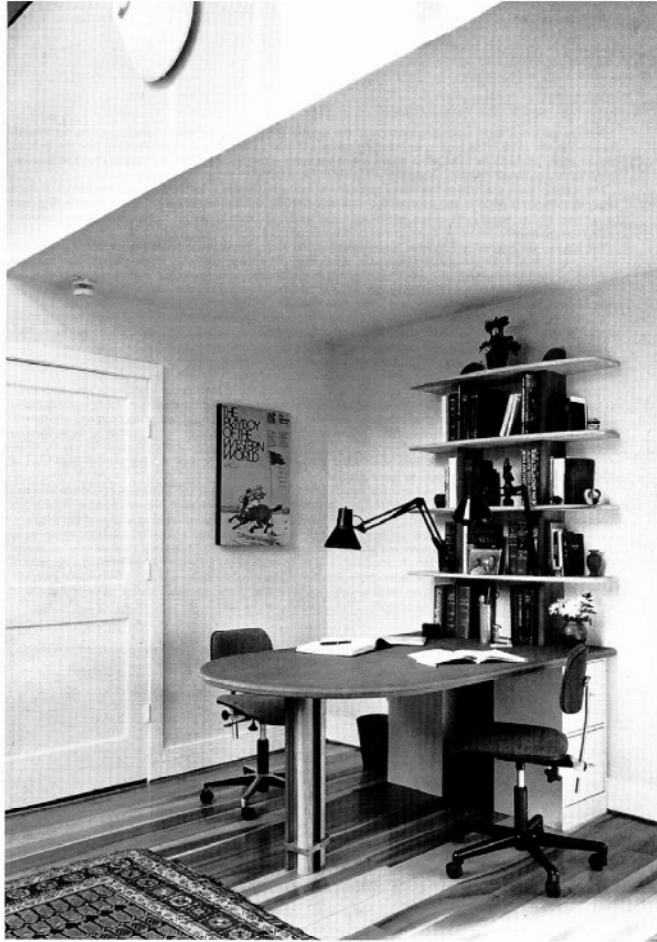


Figure 21 *Living room, south. A dialogue between the kitchen void below and the expressive bay window above is effected with a considered application of a variety of lighting and texture. The bay window underside has some custom detailing applied to catch light and provide finish. A sense of the major axis can be seen in the ongoing corridor to the left. Note the ubiquitous poplar flooring.*

Figure 22 *Work room. With the bedroom loft above, a large-scale niche accommodates a simple partner's desk for a young author-architect and his law-student wife. The column support for the desk, the zigzag light, and the wrapping mouldings all provide a sense of quiet articulation and expression.*



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Perhaps the single most surprising element in the room is the interior bay window applied to the south wall, centered in the gable. This large-scale standard exterior element presents a positive intrusion into the double-height space, producing a focal point where one is thoroughly needed. Additionally, magenta-painted tie-rods, hung lights, and fan all conspire to add life and scale to the rather lofty north-facing space.

The major positive element in this sea of space is the fireplace. Overly objectified (versus integrated), it has a larger-than-furniture scale to add a formal focus on axis with the vertical window array. When tie-rods, flue, and hung lights all follow this same axis, a second secondary ordering datum is created, helping to subdivide a potentially awkward room.

The kitchen is designed to condense storage and provide maximum utility in a small space. A not-so-low wall provides visual linkage but allows perceptual distinction. The kitchen and living spaces form the now-standard functional couplet of "serving and served" and are the north-oriented, view-responsive portions of the house.

The south, solar-oriented part contains a "career zone" work area on the first floor along with the storage utility room—which functions as the basement in this elevated house.

Above these two utilitarian spaces are the twin private sections of the house. Bedroom and bath offer no inkling of their presence until one ascends the stair. Here, the third subaxis in the house is presented, in the form of the upstairs corridor—aligned with the bath door and sink, with the window and light at its terminus.

In the bath itself, a subtle tile pattern, cathedralized ceiling of painted tongue-and-groove material (allusive to the entry), and teak appointments are used to create an intimacy of detail that embraces its occupants.

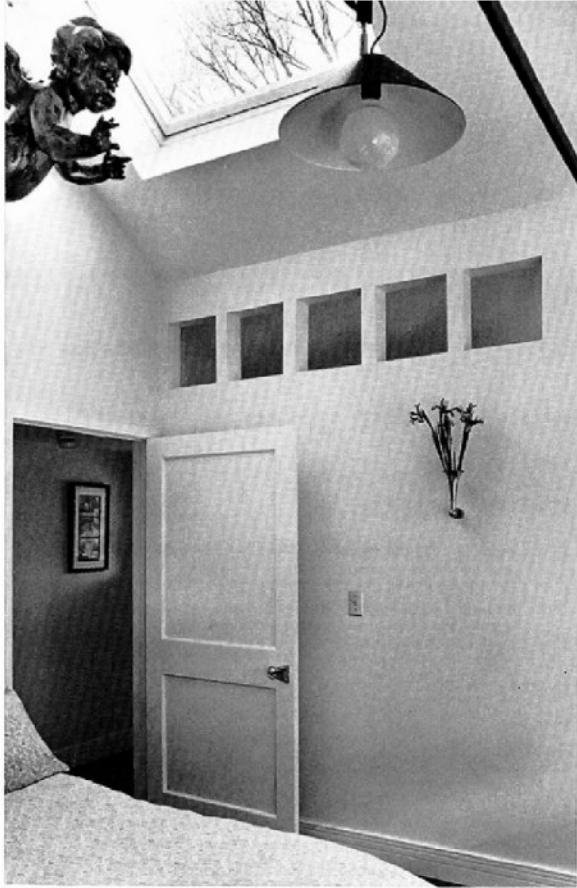
In the bedroom, the gable end center is used to orient the bed to the custom upper windows of the south array. As in the living room, a lighting fixture, fan, and tie-rod add scale and delight from above. A large prefabricated skylight releases the eyes of the bed resident and provides indirect morning light and perfect summer ventilation. The bedroom is indeed the pilothouse of the Dickinson home, using its house-centered posture to create the seat of personal power.

The second storage room, in the form of a walk-in closet and laundry, feeds off the bedroom. A high level of density is achieved by using the vertical space available.

A note on expansion: Small houses may not remain small forever. Adding to the Dickinson house takes on two scenarios, planned by the architect. The first scheme involves internal addition only. The east portion of the living room over the fireplace can easily accommodate a child's bedroom, creating an inglenook around the fireplace. Similarly, the "basement" utility room can have a half bath inserted into its space. Internal addition is quite painless, using all existing structural support and leaving exterior surfaces untouched, save for a moved window or two. The second scenario (involving a longer occupancy and more money) would be to build a freestanding tower to the east—connected at the top of the stairs only—which would house two bedrooms and a bath. Since presently there is no glazing to the northeast, no existing view would be obstructed, and similarly the westerly septic field and sight-line restriction would be respected.

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Figure 23 *Loft and stair. A large-scale, positive form is revealed within the simple envelope of the house. Tie-rod, light, and skylight beckon (upper left) while the stair focuses upon the low-ceiling corridor. Note the window-muntin shadows cast upon the loft front, and the openings at the top of the interior wall (center), which provide natural illumination to the stair itself.*



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Figure 24 *Bedroom. Juxtaposed elements are cut into or are applied upon the planes described, while other items sit in the open space defined.*

Figure 25 *Bedroom ceiling, bed-bound prospect. Not unlike the dangling toys in an infant's crib mobile, these elements—structural, utilitarian, and whimsical—float under the arched ceiling and yet defer to the centered focus of the room, the custom fixed window of the south wall (left).*



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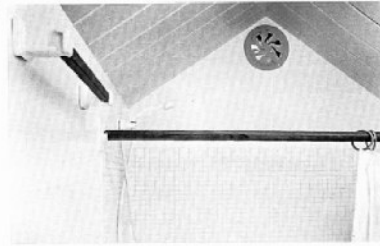


Figure 26 *Tile. The tile pattern, which is oriented to the shower rod and centered on the wall, effortlessly accommodates the eye and brings the scale down to an intimacy unprecedented in the house.*

Figure 27 *Bath. Window, light, and sink center on the doorway opposite, which in turn addresses the bath beyond; all the orientations create a sense of accommodation. Note that the tile, rock, cathedralized ceiling, and fixtures all help to enliven a tiny room.*



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THE HOUSE AS A PROTOTYPE

The question remains, is this house merely a nice idiosyncratic project, evolved of personal preference, or does it have lessons for the general art of small-house design?

The answer to each question, for this house and all the projects in this book, is yes. With an atypical site and an owner-architect, this is not an average scenario. But my contention is that the difficulty of the topography and wetlands conditions balances the relative flexibility of having an owner-architect.

Similarly, the benefit of the absence of an architect's fee (in this case determined as 15 percent of \$65,000, or \$9750) could be balanced by the use of small-scale (3/8 inch equals 1 foot) drawings done for a fixed fee, which would be offered by this particular architect, for example, for \$3000.

The plethora of custom-designed elements can be seen as indulgent hily-gilding, which could be eliminated to cut costs.

Other than landscaping and painting by the owners, this house was built on the basis of a contract with a general contractor, with the owner purchasing some appliances directly and installing some oddball items personally.

Given that no two projects are alike, the Dickinson house represents a clear image of the dance between the standard and the lyric. If you simplify the most common framing techniques and apply them in a manner that facilitates creative adaptation, you can find the innovative possibilities inherent in the standard.

It is hoped that the photos of this house and the principles set forth in the introduction dovetail to the point of mutual reinforcement. A small house needn't be intimidated by its size, and it needn't try to be anything more than a simple dwelling.

It is in finding the harmony between utility, construction, and art that architecture grows beyond the simply servile. The intangible elements of form, scale, detail, and space can be manipulated so thoroughly in a small house that there are no excuses for the architect except a failure of imagination.

The following pages show the manifest implementations of the basic precepts discussed in the introduction. If a common thread of thought is present and reinforced by these words, then so much the better for all those people seeking to reward their hard work and nesting instincts with thoughtful, affordable homes.

COST-SAVING ASPECTS ENUMERATED

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|---|--|
| 1. No basement | 8. Single utility chase |
| 2. No gutters, leaders, or perimeter drains | 9. Single-direction framing—no load-collecting beams or columns |
| 3. No curving walls | 10. Symmetrical volume—no eccentric loading, hence no beams |
| 4. Minimized number of windows and doors | 11. Maximum utilization of structural properties of framing lumber (optimum span and cantilever) |
| 5. Straight-on eaves, no windows or platforms | 12. Most importantly— <i>minimized</i> number of square feet built |
| 6. No flashing, save at flue penetration of roof, and standard drip caps over doors and windows | |
| 7. One bathroom | |