

In Morris Cove, a
bridge to the past

ATHOME

Still By The Sea

BY DUO DICKINSON

PHOTOS: LESLEY ROY

For many of us, our houses follow the patterns of our lives. Typically this means getting a “real” place to live when we partner off, create space for children, adapt to empty-nesting, divorce or bringing the office home.

For Chuck and Marcella Mascola, their 1989 wedding was the first page of a quarter-century adventure. Chuck’s marketing firm, the Mascola Group, had established itself as a major player in the field, and his success and the basic instinct to create a nest meant desire found resources and only needed a venue to realize a home. Cruising along the shoreline, there was one property the Mascolas loved: a small beach house on Cove

Street in New Haven’s Morris Cove with some extra land to the side.

Researching the property, the couple found that the house was likely built around the turn of the century as a summer cottage. Old maps unearthed by the Mascolas show that the land to the east of the original cottage had once been the site of a small wharf, but was subsequently filled in.

Screwing up their courage, in January 1994 Chuck and Marcella approached the owner and asked if they could purchase the home and the adjoining lot. Timing being everything, the owner was disposed to sell, and even helped by acceding to terms that allowed a young couple to acquire waterfront property.

Chuck Mascola is a Morris Cove native, and the prospect of coming home to create a home for a full family’s future was a dream come true — a dream they subsequently dubbed “SeaSide.” With nest in hand, the couple filled their home and lives with twin daughters, Gianna and Lea, in 1998. That’s when the need for more room was made manifest.

Fortunately, the extant wee cottage was set closer to the water than the road, leaving space on the lot to build a substantial addition, which took place in 1999. The final home was built out to 2,500 square feet with addition of a living room, two bedrooms and a playroom.

But in the century since the existing home was built, the rules and regulations for building on



A simple traditional kitchen has durable stone countertops and is custom-designed to adapt to the structural imposition (left) that results when a subdivided cottage has been completely opened up.



Living/dining area: The original stair remains (at left), grandfathered into code compliance, while a new street-facing family room (right) must be set at the elevated code-compliant height.

the shore have evolved from nonexistent to imposing many layers of local, state and federal regulations on anyone daring to try to build anything. So the new space had to meet 1999 standards for structure and elevation above sea level. This meant the new streetside half of the house is built about 30 inches higher than the existing cottage floor levels.

Luckily for them, the couple worked with a highly responsive builder — Vacolla Home Builders of Stratford — to create a new lower level living space focused on a “beehive” fieldstone fireplace, and the twins’ bedrooms, playroom and bath on the second floor. The open first floor and the cathedral ceilings on the second overcame any sense of tightness, and water views were captured.

The original, older cottage had had enough mid-century remodeling to feel a bit “contemporary” despite its venerable bones, and the Mascolas’ addition presents a more traditional face to the street: Trim, porch and windowing appear faithful to Morris Cove’s 19th-century heritage.

Babies were thus given beds, and the couple remodeled the main floor waterside of the home in 2002. A muddled existing waterside first floor was cleaned out, creating sweeping views of the harbor by moving a bathroom, while the tiny



The living room area is surrounded by light maintaining a cottage but spacious feel.

in 2008. The windows and siding match the addition’s traditional detailing, but the suite’s interior is remarkably open and fuses sleeping, sitting and bathroom space - with a low wall allowing for in-bathroom viewing of the sleeping space’s TV and fireplace.

The structure was bared, with insulation applied over it. Interior detailing is as modern as the skin is traditional — its hybrid sensibility a perfect reflection of the casual embrace of the sea Morris Cove embodies.

This near two-decade-long home-creation story reflects the devotion of a focused family to provide a lifelong safe harbor by the sea. But it’s the final element of this ensemble that magically transforms the entire site with one completely unexpected gesture.

The starting point is the fact that this is a two-lot property. All the work the Mascolas undertook had maintained the integrity of the second, side lot that had been the site of the now-long-gone wharf. But that side of the house remained inconvenient for boat access until hurricanes Sandy and Irene pumped seawater into the original home’s basement.

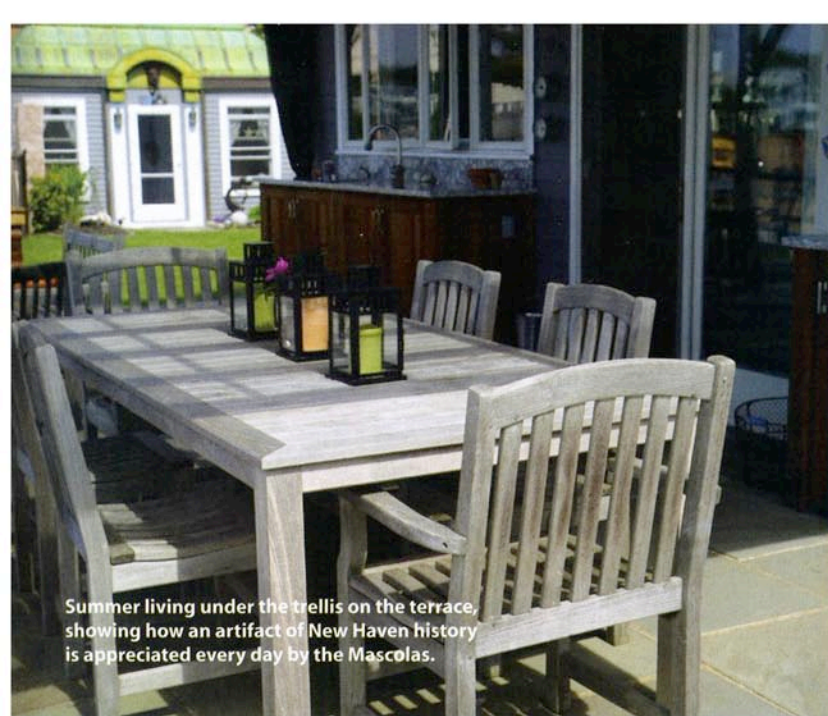
Like so many other coastal homeowners, these extreme weather events caused the Mascolas to reconsider their site. So they undertook the filling of the property, raising the ground level

kitchen was expanded and reoriented to face the water.

A large deck, with cedar log-supported pergola and stone patio, followed. This extended the usable space for summertime socializing,

agreeably enhanced by the installation of an in-ground pool.

Fulfilling the master plan, the final not-yet-renovated space — the harbor-facing master bedroom — was completely gutted and rehabbed



Summer living under the trellis on the terrace, showing how an artifact of New Haven history is appreciated every day by the Mascolas.



Marcella and Chuck Mascola enjoy the fruits of two decades of risk, planning, building and raising a family on Morris Cove.



Dramatic panoramas of Morris Cove are captured by the extended deck and enjoyed by Lila.

and installing the in-ground pool with granite patio.

Here is where serendipity transforms a place: every weekday, Chuck Mascola drove into New Haven across the old Tomlinson Bridge, as he had since childhood. It was an old-school double-leaf bascule bridge with hinged drawbridges. After many collisions with barges that rendered the drawbridge inoperable, the bridge was completely replaced in 2003 by a vertical lift bridge.

Built in 1922, at a time of Beaux Arts expressionism in civic design, the Tomlinson Bridge had the ornate detailing and materials that reflected the pride of its city — including exquisite gatehouses for the harbor-watching bridge-raisers. Belvedere-ish copper-roofed pavilions sat atop the bridges pivotal pier supports. These fascinated Mascola.

As he witnessed the demolition of the ancient bridge, Mascola's imagination was captured by these romantic follies. So a year after they disappeared, he decided to track them down. In a series of coincidences he found that Clinton antiques dealer Jeffrey Bradley had custody of one of the pavilions. But Bradley had a buyer for the piece — in California, no less. But Mascola outbid him, and the rest is history.

The entire roof structure was intact, and the perfectly patina'd copper roof was in good shape, having been safely warehoused. Given that the open side of the site was being raised to pre-empt flooding, the time to act was at hand — so the

Mascolas set about to reinvent the bridge-raiser's shed as the "little house," as the family calls it. A fully new foundation and walls were erected to support the relic, and a 60-foot boardwalk now connects the "little house" to the patio.

The waterside folly has many real uses, and maintains the side lot's independent status. It directly addresses the pool, and a toilet and sink are under the copper bonnet, but a shower is deliciously exposed to view, and is used daily by Chuck Mascola. Fold-out couches allow visitors to find romantic accommodation, and a future woodstove promises extended seasonal utility.

A place was made for history at the Mascolas' "SeaSide," and it reincarnates the salvaged object's connection to the sea. Whimsy can infuse domestic life when it's planned for — even serendipitously. When they preserved the integrity of their added lot, when they realized they had to protect against potential hurricane damage by raising its grade, there was no master-planned pavilion perch. But design should embrace inspiration, whether historic or spontaneous or both.

Of course, inspiration can go two ways: Objects can inspire design, but design can inspire our lives, as well. Marcella Mascola, who retired from the Madison Avenue advertising industry, has recently launched Mascola Design to assist other homeowners with their home interior design needs. ❖