

Dickinson House Madison, Connecticut By Duo Dickinson



Because of the proximity of the land seller's house (at right in bottom photo), Dickinson tried to create the sense of a retrofitted carriage house, with a carport below. Roof pitch and materials were derived from the neighbor. A simple symmetrical form was used for construction economy and for effective massing. To make the most of a few windows, vertical shapes focus on tree views and horizontal on the sweep of salt

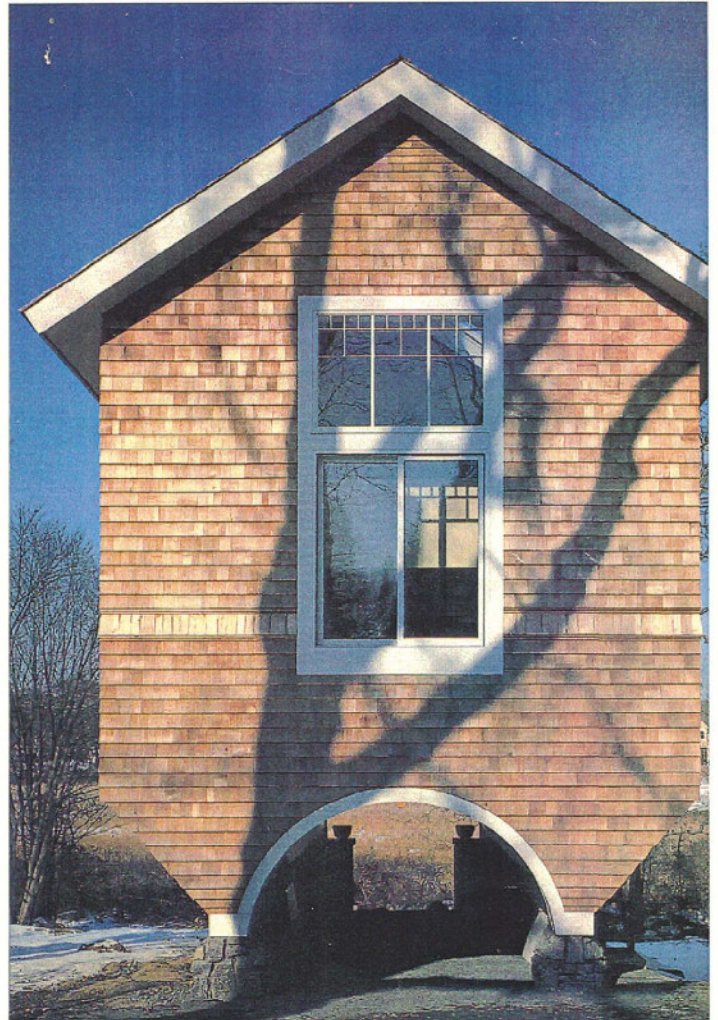
marsh. The south-facing window (opposite) is composed of a stack slider topped with a mullioned light. The same fenestration rears on the western wall, where it is seen immediately upon entering the house—a jingling touch. Slipper windows in a cruciform arrangement (above) dot the living room with lively points of light and provide ventilation in summer.

What more deserving client can an architect have than a young couple with limited means who are determined to have a house of their own? In this instance that young couple happens to consist of the architect himself, Duo Dickinson, and his wife Liz, a law student. And luckily Dickinson believes that "when there is less quantity, you can up the quality of your efforts.... The limits are liberating."

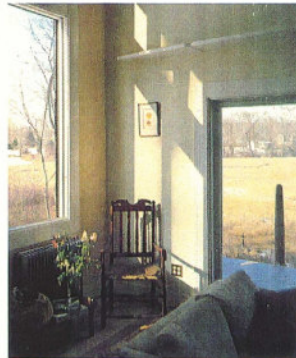
Limits Dickinson had in abundance. A tight budget not only limited the size of what he could build, but the lot that best met his price and location criteria, a subdivision of the backyard of an existing house, was wetlands—thus the first floor had to be 20 feet above mean high water, any basement walls would have to be hydrostatically designed, and an expensive septic system was needed. Further adding to costs, 100 feet of ledge had to be blasted for utility lines. Because of the lot's proximity to the seller's house, its style and a sightline restriction had to be considered. And a north-facing view made passive solar heating impractical. Balancing the limitations were a superb location—on, but hidden from, the main road of a desirable Connecticut shore town. A superb view—of six acres of salt marsh, a sea of reeds that changes with the seasons. And superb trees—three ancient white oaks and one grand old maple that are home to countless birds.

True to his word, Dickinson did find these limitations liberating. He created a house that has been variously described as an ark, a covered bridge, a doghouse and a car wash—a simple gable-roofed rectangle cantilevered out over two bearing walls that lift it to the height of the white oak branches (and dispense with the expensive basement). Its 38-foot length was derived from 16-inch framing modules; its 20-foot width from about 2 x 10 joists. The six analogy is apt, for not one inch of space has been wasted: the two-story living room is just long enough to avoid being perceived as a shaft; the galley kitchen has just enough space for two cooks to collaborate; minimum space has been devoted to closets and bath. Yet the effect is not confining. A major axis allows the eye to travel the full 38-foot length of the house. The nautical tightness of the kitchen and office areas merely emphasizes the exuberant vertical spaces to the north and south. The oversize windows draw the eye up and out. And the entry, orport, and deck add 800 square feet of useable space to the house's 1,100 square feet of finished, heated space.

The Dickinson house is about the same size as the condominium units many young couples buy these days. Dickinson wishes they realized they could afford more; he's even writing a book about small houses. So it was with great plea that he reported that condominium units with a view are selling for \$135,000 in his town. His house, including land, came to \$105,000. N. G. G.







The focal point of the living room is the surprising interior use of an ordinary bay window (opposite), which lends scale to the expanse of shear wall used to stiffen the open area. Other scale-giving devices in the living room, which is 21 feet high at its peak, include an 18-foot-wide shelf (top left), which also hides a steel rod reinforcing the north wall; a whimsically decorated fireplace that, according to Dickinson, "mediates between the size of the furniture and the size of the space"; and extra-wide baseboard moldings that wrap around all openings because, says the architect, "there's something about a framed opening that seems to make furniture more comfortable." The dual-career office area tucked under the sleeping loft on the south side of the house is shown at bottom right. Floor plans (previous page) show the simplicity of the entire scheme, with private

areas relegated to a loft and public areas below. Heating is zoned so that the north-facing rooms can be closed off from the south-facing office and bedroom to save warmth. To expand the house, Dickinson would either extend the loft along the east wall, turning the fireplace area into an inglenook, or build a two-bedroom tower alongside the house.

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