

**W**hy are humans drawn to salt water? Coastal Connecticut is one of the most beautiful places in America, and the core of its appeal is our wonderfully ragged, marshy, but only occasionally sandy, shoreline. But it's not just the coast itself that holds appeal, it's also the endless wild and teeming salt marshes that make verdant seas of spartina grasses in the summer followed by their poignantly dead husks that collapse to form a braided mat of reeds in the winter.

Debra and Dave Ivanovich have salt water in their bones. For years they owned a small cottage in Milford, but in 2005 they realized that with two young children they needed to do something if they were to live there for the next 20 years. They hired a young architectural designer, Ed Fusco, whose commitment to doing good work for families is about as passionate as the Ivanoviches' love of the coast.

But the sad fruits of Fusco's preliminary design efforts proved that their existing home could never be made into what they dreamed of. Given that this paper exercise took place in the glory days of apparently ever-escalating house prices, their waterfront cottage was then worth a pretty penny. Rather than opt for a painful renovation that wouldn't get them what they wanted, they sold their shoreline home and moved inland to become flatlanders. They opted for a five-year-old spec home in Shelton, fully finished and ready to accommodate a family.

Despite trying to convince themselves that big and new was better than old and on the water, they realized that living away from the coast wasn't going to work. "Within weeks," Dave Ivanovich recalls, "we realized we had made a mistake — that living in Milford by the water was what we loved. We bought a nice piece of property right on the Charles E. Wheeler wildlife preserve, a large salt marsh abutting the Housatonic River at the Cedar Beach area of Milford."

# The Eternal Lure of the Sea

*How a Milford couple (and the architect) went to extraordinary lengths to stay on the water*

By DUO DICKINSON

A corner of windows captures a wrap-around view for informal dining. Built-ins and window treatments make this a fully finished space







The proud owners Debra and Dave Ivanovich in their tower perch.

As with almost all coastal properties, there was an existing “tenant” — a little house that staked out turf in an area where federal coastal regulations often serve as a straightjacket for creativity. This meant that they had to reconnect with Ed Fusco. Both he and the Ivanoviches knew that the existing house they had just bought met no codes and was as gnarly as their previously rejected home in Milford. A new house would have to be built that would allow them to accommodate a full family life — back on the water. Fortunately, with the housing boom still booming, the sale of their Shelton home could finance the best of all worlds — a new home on salt water.

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The entry - people are boldly greeted and jauntily encouraged to ascend under the dynamic entry roof by the expansive steps, while cars sneak in to the left.

With an existing home on a coastal site, it's often easier to visualize what design criteria are present when you opt to build new. You have the ability to sit within its walls and see how the existing structure addresses the landscape, and learn from it. Recounts Fusco: 'Before [the old cottage] was torn down, we climbed onto the roof to 'see what we could see.' The views were spectacular."

But when you build a new house, the limitations are spectacular as well. The first floor had to be 12 feet above mean high tide (with everything underneath being designed to allow flood waters to flow through). The elevation of the sandy site was seven feet, meaning that there had to be at least a five-foot elevation of the home's habitable space on a very tight lot.

Through extreme creativity, and ample decking, they were able to make a 1,600-square-foot footprint mesh with the ground plane and still accommodate large fair-weather social gatherings with an *al fresco* connection to the unlimited sweep



Even incidental windows have extraordinary views.



of salt marsh that surrounds the back and side of the house.



Once a new home is elevated and has views on each side, the question becomes how far up can you go to get even more beautiful views. In this case, the zoning code was tightly defined, and Fusco was able to create a 2.5-story house set above the code-compliant first floor height, and leave room for a garage below. The home's uppermost level has walkouts and windows that connect it to the much wider world that often escapes attention in tightly crowded coastal communities. Living on or near the water often means you get one heavily framed slot of exposure to capture a glimpse of something blue or green within a dense-packed neighborhood — not so on the Ivanoviches' salt marsh-bound lot.

Above the garage level, the first floor of the house is extraordinarily open and uses level changes to differentiate living, dining and family areas. Where there are no views a mudroom, bathroom, entry, stairwell and private den form the infrastructure supporting all the openness, and a screen porch set amid a wraparound deck extends a bug-free zone amid sweeping views.

The second floor is an intricate interweaving puzzle of three bedrooms and two baths, with the two-story entry space married to the stairs and feeding into an elevated TV den and laundry/exercise area. The third floor is essentially an extension of the staircase housing a tower room with a sweeping 300-degree view of salt marsh and coastal areas. The tightly configured roof pitches translate on the interior into a celestial garret for those who are partying or seeking solitude.

Unlike inland sites there is little available yard space once the house and decks are built over the small lot. The plinth or base for all this activity had to be open to allow water to flow through, but it could house automobiles (and does). Additionally, a generous entry stair makes the transition up to the elevated living floor a happy event of anticipation to the celebratory highly visible entry porch and provides a loving embrace for visitors on an almost 3.5-story structure.

Fusco employed multiple eave lines



The kitchen is surrounded by places to sit and socialized, while structural columns are incorporated into its focal point, the island.





The living room is set down a step from surrounding spaces, and fully incorporates the focal points of night-time viewing (when there is no salt marsh view) of fireplace and television.



Wrap around decks provide sweeping views of tidal salt marsh, doubling the fair weather social space of the house.

and windows organized to center on the various roofs he used to turn a potentially boring building into a delightful ensemble. There are multiple extended overhangs for those walking up and into a delightful dance of architectural forms. The "style" could be called "Shingle" or "Craftsman," but in truth hews to the quirky exuberance of all good coastal Connecticut architecture in which craft and unabashed enthusiasm weave to form a structure that is obviously looking out, but also begs to be looked at. The corner tower that captures the most sweeping views of the salt marsh is the lone vertical element in all the horizontal sweep of decks, porch roofs and multiple gables.

The final layer of expression lies in the innovative touches that Fusco brings to all of his projects. The ties that connect two sides of the entry roof are virtually structural sculptures where arched brackets support cantilevered roofs. Railings, columns and window trim all feel as though they come from the same gene pool, and windows and doors are coordinated with each part of the home to create order amid all the visual activity.

No two residential design projects tell the



same story. The water-inland-salt marsh dance of the Ivanovichs only serves to galvanize their will to be tied to the water. Ed Fusco provided a design that gives full exposure to a unique landscape under tight design constraints.

Fusco's passion for his work is not just artistic, it is also fundamentally personal.

Explains Debbie Ivanovich: "He truly cared about the project. He spent endless hours at the site. No wonder we've become good friends with Ed, his wife Linda, and his two sons.

"I actually say out loud several times a week, 'I love this house!'" ❖