



INTERIORS

# ISLAND HOUSE

If you think island life is a breeze, try building a house on one.

**P**erched on a tiny island 1,000 feet off the Branford shore, the Robert Wortmann house has passed muster with the Branford Building and Engineering Department, Sewer Authority, Coastal Area Management, and Shellfish Commission; the East Shore District Health Department and the South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority, the Connecticut Department of Transportation, Coastal Resources Management, and Department of Environmental Protection; the U.S. Emergency Management Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers.

It has taxed the ingenuity of a succession of contractors, stonemasons, roofers, carpenters and helicopter pilots.

It took all this, plus about a million dollars.

"What saved this job," says architect Duo Dickinson with characteristic enthusiasm, "is that the finished product did not suffer from the vagaries and exigencies of the construction process. First-rate materials and fine craftsmanship triumphed in the end."

Dickinson was one of three architects invited to show their work to Bob and Mary Wortmann in the summer of 1987. Driving from his Madison office through the manicured streets of Upper Saddle River, N.J., he rolled up to the Wortmanns' imposing Georgian-style manse with a sinking heart. What had inspired these people to consider an architect whose career was made designing "small kinky homes and additions"? he wondered. "I thought, 'What the hell—I'll give it a try.'"



BUILDING THIS CRAZY QUILT OF ANGLES ATOP A BED

OF ROCKS WAS A TOUR DE FORCE EVEN BY THIMBLE ISLAND STANDARDS.

BY GITTA MORRIS



What attracted them to Dickinson, Bob Wortmann recalls, was that "Doo was the one who had the most flair and the most test for life. We knew he would really share our enthusiasm."

A few months later, the Wortmanns braved a January blizzard, arriving on the dot for their 7 a.m. appointment with Dickinson in Madison, who by then had completed four house models—three of them fairly traditional and one "kind of wacky." Most of the island homes are shingle-style cottages, and Dickinson predicted that his clients, too, would stick with the norm.

When, without so much as a glance at each other, the Wortmanns both pointed to the nonconformist house, Dickinson rejoiced. "Right away," he says, "I knew it was going to be an interesting project."

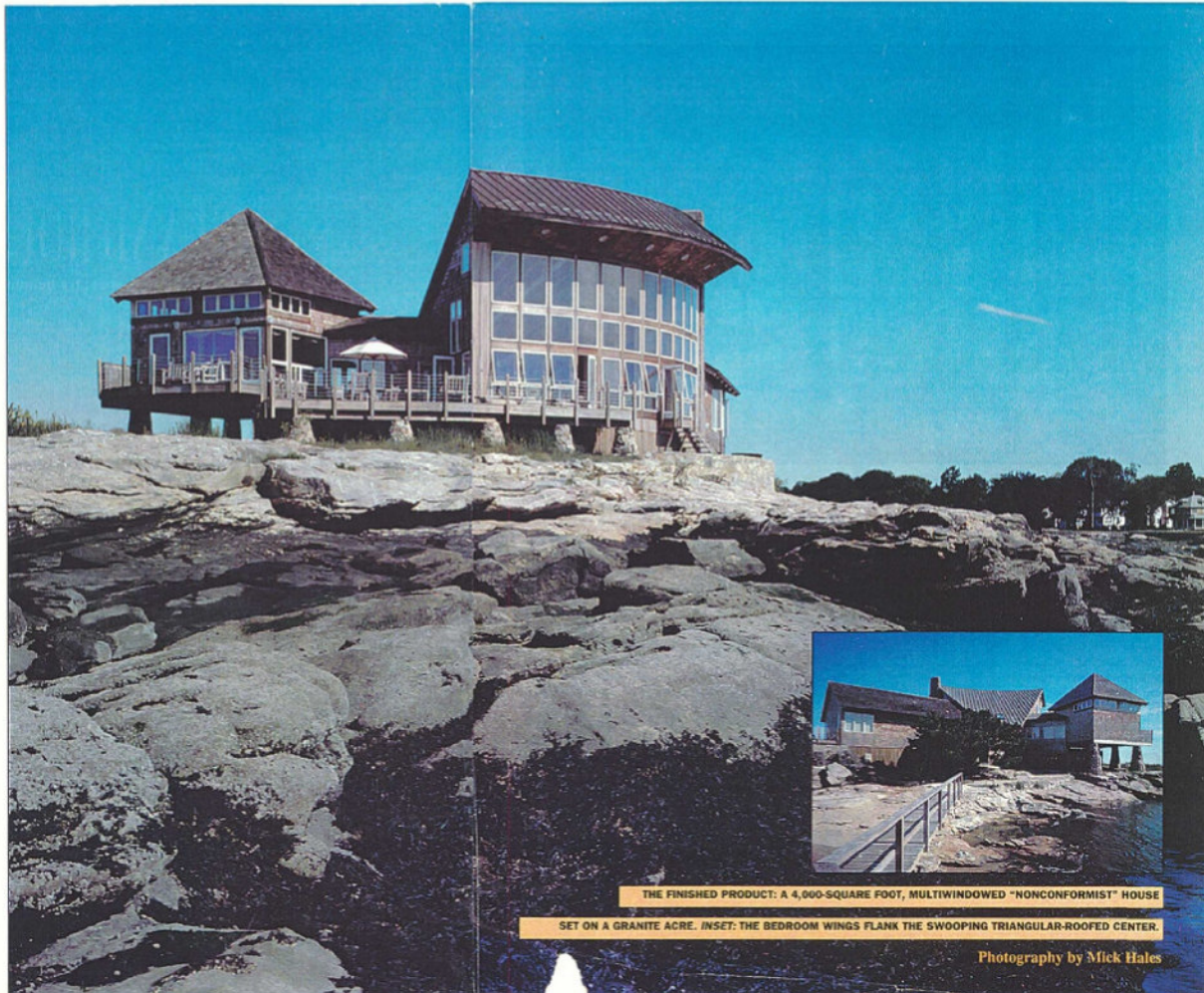
It was and it is. Set apart from the Thimble Island homes clustered off Stony



A HELICOPTER AIRLIFT SAVED THE DAY.

Creek, the Wortmann house dominates the water view from Braanford's Indian Neck beaches. Seen from shore, it looms out of its rock bed, a crazy quilt of angles conventionally clad in weathered shingles. On the south side, obscured from all but boaters' eyes, the house takes a flying leap, its 25-foot-high windowed wall embracing a vast, unadorned expanse of Long Island Sound, and, yes, sheer heaven.

The Wortmanns and their three children—Erika, 11, Andrea, 10, and Robert, 8—fell in love with the Thimbles while visiting friends there in 1986. When Green Island came on the market for \$340,000 in 1987, they snapped it up.



THE FINISHED PRODUCT: A 4,000-SQUARE FOOT, MULTIWINDOWED "NONCONFORMIST" HOUSE

SET ON A GRANITE ACRE. INSET: THE BEDROOM WINGS FLANK THE SWOOPING TRIANGULAR-ROOFED CENTER.

Photography by Mick Hales



**THE DRAMATIC, LIGHT-FLOODED LIVING-DINING-KITCHEN AREA IS COZIED UP WITH WICKER AND FLORALS.**

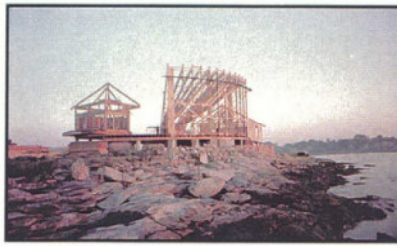
While Green Island is not technically one of the Thimbles, according to Unc DaRos, a marine contractor and bonafide "Creeker" who worked on the house, it is one of the 365 "rocks" within a 5-mile radius of Stony Creek. Thirty-two of them hold 100 houses, a veritable Disneyland of architecture including a Caribbean-style cottage, a granite fortress and a Tudor mansion. Yet the Wortmann house is viewed by many Creekers as "out of character."

The original house had been built 25 years before, and was grandfathered in under zoning regulations mandating that the bottom construction line be at least 12 feet above mean high water. The new plans called for quadrupling the size of the original structure, and the only solution was to tear down the original.

What made the teardown so poignant was that it had been built by the owner with tender loving care. Bob Wortmann recalls that Dickinson would have liked to have retained the old stone house, but, in fact, only one stone semiarc wall was retained to define the pocket courtyard at the entrance

of the new house.

If constructing a 4,000-square-foot house



**PHASE ONE: FIRST TO BE DROPPED IN PLACE WERE THE BEAMS, 42 FEET LONG AND 1,000 POUNDS EACH.**

on a 1-acre granite island weren't precarious enough, the project was complicated by setback regulations and the Wortmanns' desire to preserve the only vegetation in sight—two pine trees and a swath of meadow.

Then there was the problem of sewage disposal. Bob Wortmann, a builder of airport terminals in the New York metropolitan area, is no neophyte when it comes to construction waylays. He could

have taken the easy way out, loading up his lot with enough fill to build a normal septic field, thus complying with regulations. Neither he nor Dickinson doubted, however, that the effluent would find its way through the rock leaching fields and into the Sound.

Instead, they decided to do the environmentally correct thing, which was to trench a pipeline 5 feet below the sandy sea bottom and pump the effluent back to shore and into the Branford sewer system. Utilities also were submerged. Only three of the Thimble Island houses have electricity, and few have water; these amenities, plus the sewer line and the setback restrictions, led the Wortmanns to the unprecedented succession of required permits.

Dickinson outlined the plan to the town building inspector, who predicted easy approval. "So I went to the meeting with this and with that," he recalls. "And just ahead of me was a guy proposing to build a 12-unit condo on Rogers Island. And the board told him, basically, 'Drop dead.'

"Then I got up and said, 'I war' ▶ 115



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◀ 72 to do the same thing." Since it was a single-family home, the board provided Dickinson with a list of agencies he needed to see. In domino fashion, each approval knocked down the door for the next. Yet what had been expected to be a one-month procedure turned into a year-and-a-half ordeal.

But the worst was not over. While seeking agency approvals, the architect put the plans out to bid. The winner, a local contractor, assured him he could meet any challenge. Then came a series of phone discussions, in the course of which Dickinson got the clear message the contractor had gotten cold feet.

For round 2, Dickinson invited a bid from Indorf Construction Co. Inc., a two-brother operation in Yorktown Heights, N.Y., with whom he'd worked many times. The Indorfs, both engineers, found the project exciting. "We thought the distance was against us in competing with companies that specialized in island construction," Ralph Indorf recalls. "But once we got the idea of erection by helicopter and working in heavy labor-force sequences of a week here and a week there, we felt we could compete."

The helicopter and the pilot were supplied by a New Hampshire-based firm specializing in airlifting building supplies to hard-to-reach places. In the long run, \$8,000 worth of helicopter rental represented savings of tens of thousands of dollars over the conventional method of barging materials over.

In quest of a shore base, the Indorfs surveyed the shoreline from the air with the pilot. Fortunately, he spotted a field, only two minutes away from the island, on which some construction was taking place. "We landed the helicopter in the middle," recalls Ralph Indorf, "and walked up to the contractor, who said, 'Sure, and I'll even give you power.' It was a godsend."

Meanwhile, the Indorfs suggested changing the design to a post-and-beam structure to expedite construction and keep costs in line. The bedroom wings, making up two-thirds of the house, were to be custom-built by Habitat, a company in Deerfield, Mass.

The 6-by-6 beams, 42 feet long and weighing 1,000 pounds each, along with wall panels in 3-by-5-foot sections, were precut at Habitat and delivered to the field. The large central section consisting of a 25-foot-high wall containing 31 casement windows was prebuilt on the field by the Indorfs' foreman and two local carpenters. Then the airlift began. While the helicopter hovered overhead, the wall sections were dropped in place, where a crew quickly bolted them into 5-inch-wide steel plates anchored in the foundation.

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By the end of the first day, the walls and beams were in place; two days later, the roof was on. For the locals lined up on shore, it was the best show in town.

From the start, construction had been sabotaged by time lags; for instance, a new survey necessitated reorienting the whole house and shoving it over, squeezing it to fit the setback. Also, a federal mandate, that the structure resist a 100 mph wind uplift potential, generated yet another tense feat of engineering.

What should have begun in spring was thus delayed until October and the onset of winter. And by late summer the following year, the Indorfs suffered the brunt of 1990's building-industry crunch. Stuck in a cash-flow problem, they had to negotiate out of the contract. A new contractor, Bill Murray of Branford, was brought in to complete the last-minute details.

Then there was the saga of the roof, a triangular affair dished out to swoop above the central section of the house like an enormous kite. Two pieces of copper are joined by a double fold that, at its best, can sustain a swimming pool. At its worst, as in the case of the Wortmann house, the interior began to resemble the Great Lakes.

Dickinson cheerfully resumes his tale. "We start with Joe Standing Seam, who's going to do a wonderful job. Then comes Sam Standing Seam, who announces that he has a *miracle* standing-seam method. But what he did was to substitute a crimp for the second fold. This caused water to gush down the dished-out roof, flooding the edges of the seams."

The architect looks momentarily chagrined. "My one solid design criterion is a house that doesn't leak. And here's this house that leaks like a sieve."

With a new standing-seam man on the roof, Dickinson drew pictures of a little U-shaped copper channel to be filled with silicone and set on top of the seam to cover the leaky crimp holes. But the roofer merely *dabbed* on the silicone, and the leaking continued. The third time did the trick, however, and the vinyl tile floors have remained bone dry.

"Truly the metaphor for the house," says Dickinson. "Everyone wanted to do the right thing, but certain things got in the way. The house is just about as good as you can do it, yet the process was enormously time-consuming. But I don't think anything was done in bad faith."

"The only time I've heard Bob sounding truly exasperated," Dickinson recalls, "was when he would call the Creeker subcontractors over and over again. He would say, 'When are you going to be there?' And they'd say, 'I'll make it there soon.' Bob would ask, 'When will you be done?' And they'd say, 'When it's

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finished."

"There was definitely a misfit between a guy who's totally straight and this group of people who are very informal, and very much colloquial."

However maddening, the frustrations have been forgiven in light of the finished product. Today, the heart of the house is a large, airy living, dining and kitchen area that soars three stories high, where it is crowned by a ceiling formed by a fan of glue-laminated beams. Natural cedar boards laid vertically, horizontally and diagonally strike an attitude of lightheartedness. Antiques—the marble surround of the bathroom sink, the front door—were rescued from the original house. Other items were created specifically for the new house—for example, a handcrafted stained-glass transom (of a seagull hovering over the water), which repeats the design of the Wortmanns' island flag.

Mary Wortmann has decorated the interior with casual aplomb. The living room is cozied up with massive wicker chairs and sofas plump with pillows in floral designs. Wicker is repeated in the 12 dining chairs that surround the glass tabletop balanced on twin swan pedestals.

On the west end, the master bedroom, tucked into what on the outside appears to be a miniature tower, rises four steps above the main house. One step higher, set on a platform, is the cane four-poster bed, separated from the water by a sea of glass.

The opposite side of the house consists of three bedrooms and a bath. The girls' room has a Laura Ashley look, with white iron beds frothed in floral-and-lace spreads and pink-and-white curtains. In Robert's room, bunk beds, red-and-blue spreads and fishnet drapes reflect a nautical theme. Above, a sleeping loft gives the children a retreat of their own. Across the hall, guests sleep in a four-poster bed, and a private deck invites quiet time.

This summer, with the house finally complete, the Wortmanns have been able to enjoy the tranquility and solitude they dreamed of five years ago. "It's so beautiful," says Mary Wortmann, "and there's so much to keep us busy. We swim, fish, do lobstering, enjoy the wildlife and the tide changes."

Would they do it again? "Yes, we would," they agree without hesitation. "We love it." Adds Bob Wortmann, "We knew it was going to be difficult, but there really weren't that many headaches. The builder was very good, and we were more than pleased with Duo. And it was exciting—the children got to ride in the helicopter, which was a whole new world to them. So there were enough bright moments; if there was any trepidation on our part, it was certainly outweighed by them." ■