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Befitting a building that  
was laboriously barged  
to its site stick by stick,  
this island home  
radiates a steadfast  
determination to hold  
its ground.





# Time

BY BRUCE D. SNIDER

# and Tide




**B**uilding a big house on a small island is a bit like building a ship in a bottle. There's plenty of room out there for a house, just as there's room in the bottle for a tiny square-rigger; the question is, how do you put it there? The ship maker has a secret: masts that fold to let the finished craft slip through the bottle's neck. The builder of this Maine island

compound, Steve Malcolm, had no such tricks at his disposal. Virtually everything that went into the project, from sand, gravel, and concrete to finishes, fixtures, and appliances had to be floated out on a barge. And while the island is only a stone's throw offshore, getting materials and heavy equipment across that narrow bit of water gave the term "bottleneck" a new richness of meaning.

## THE LOGISTICS OF BUILDING ON A MAINE ISLAND SITE.

"We had to play the tides," Malcolm says. Due to the heavy loads involved, the 45-by-145-foot barge could be loaded only when it was resting on the bottom. "We had to get the trucks on the barge at dead low tide," Malcolm says, "then we had to wait two and a half hours till the barge would float. Then we had to do





Centered under the towering cupola, the second-floor hall doubles as a sitting room. A large opening funnels light to the living and dining rooms below (opposite, below).





## Details: Mix and Pour

Fourteen hours is a long time for a load of concrete to spin around without becoming a solid, mixer-shaped plug, but that's how long it took to get from the nearest batch plant to the site of this island home. Even with additives to slow set up, builder Steve Malcolm found the timing a little too close for comfort. After a few nervous runs, it dawned on Malcolm that he could silence that ticking sound by adding cement to the mix only when the mixers had reached the island. "They came down with the aggregate and the sand already in the truck, but no cement," he says. That took some of the stress out of the exercise but added more, well, exercise. The crew built an earthen ramp from which to load bagged cement into the mixers by hand. For the floor pour on the main house, Malcolm recalls, "I think it was 400 or 500 bags of cement—at 90 pounds each." —*B.D.S.*



the same thing on the other side." A typical one-way trip took up to 12 hours. And if low tide arrived at 3 or 4 a.m., that's when Malcolm ordered his deliveries to the dock.

As a consequence, Malcolm subjected every operation to a strict transportation-cost analysis. Some items were non-negotiable, such as digging a well. That required barging across a drilling rig. Handling the timber cleared from the site was less straightforward. "We had about 110 cord of softwood, in logs," Malcolm says. Hauling it off on logging trucks would take four or five barge runs at \$4,000 to \$5,000 each. Instead, he rented a chipping rig. "We made a chip-lined road all the way to the other side of the island," he says. The choice between laying a power cable to the island or running the compound on solar panels hinged on psychological impact rather than cost. "The dollars were about the same," Malcolm says, "but why be hooked up to the mainland like that?" The owner followed that advice and went with a large photovoltaic array backed up by a diesel generator.

Not every such decision went Malcolm's way. For one thing, he notes, "It would have been a far different project if we didn't have to have a full basement." To avoid the difficult logistics of a large-scale concrete pour, not to mention the blasting required to cut a cellar hole in the granite ledge that underlies the island's thin soil, architect John Silverio designed the house on a crawlspace. The owner insisted on a basement—and a pool—tossing another ball into Malcolm's juggling act.

Depending on the tides, concrete mixers might leave the local batch plant at 2 a.m.—"I'd hear them go by and I'd say, 'Time to get up,'" Malcolm says—to be loaded by 4:30. "I think the record was five; they just fit on the barge." Then the drivers would wait until the tide floated the barge. Once across the water—a mere 30-minute trip—the trucks would wait on the barge while the tide finished its rise and fell again low enough to off-load. The return trip the following day (concrete crews would take a skiff back to the mainland after a pour) was a replay: load at low tide, wait to float, cross the water, wait for low tide, drive off 10 to 12 hours after loading.

Every delivery of materials or heavy equipment involved a similar process, a routine that could have led to mutiny. But Malcolm and his crew were energized by the many logistical challenges, and by the island itself. For centuries a seasonal Indian camp, the site is still dotted with ancient shell mounds. On breaks, crew members combed the island for arrowheads, axheads, and pipe stems. They were also inspired by the architecture, which succeeds at the daunting task of improving this already special place.

Architect John Silverio has spent the past 25 years designing homes on the coast and islands of Maine, developing a personal style with influences as local as the Shingle-style cottage and as distant as Norway's medieval stave churches. The result is a breed of buildings that look as native to this environment as the granite, spruce, and pine that surround them. This site, Silverio says, spoke with a particular insistence. The property occupies the southern half of the 64-acre island—because the other half is a nature conservancy, this will be the only home on the island—where a wooded bluff with a broad view of the tidal Sheepscot River presented the obvious location for the main house. Silverio's plan responds to the view, the path of the sun across



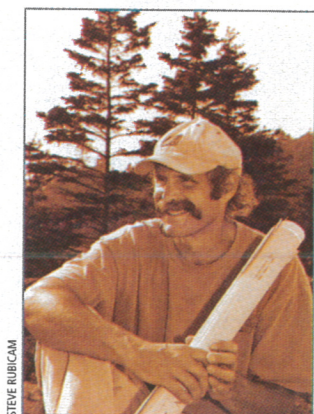


Viewed end-on, the house reflects the influence of both the New England Shingle style and Norwegian stave-church architecture. (Opposite) Inside, the feeling is classic Maine cottage.





# The Builder: Branch Manager



When Steve Malcolm became a builder in 1979, with all of a year's worth of carpentry experience, he had no intention of founding a conglomerate. Things just worked

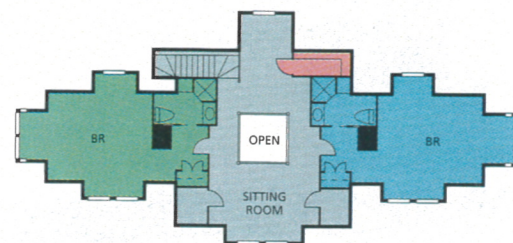
out that way. From the beginning, Malcom says, "I was fortunate enough to surround myself with people who were a whole lot more capable than myself as far as carpentry is concerned." What Malcolm brought to the table was organizational ability, client skills, and an emphasis on craftsmanship and reputation over short-run profits. The combination made branching out almost inevitable. ■ A major remodel involving extensive millwork led Malcolm in 1984 to found a cabinet shop, Knickerbocker Woodworking. In the late '80s he hired a designer and spun off Knickerbocker Design. Two years ago he found a rare skilled painter and bought her out, establishing—that's right—Knickerbocker Painting. Running on an even keel through good times and bad, the companies have become a haven for skilled workers who don't care to run their own businesses.

■ Today, Malcolm's Knickerbocker Group employs 27 people, a substantial payroll by the standards of small-town Maine. That is a consequence less of a plan than of a philosophy. "The money came when it came," Malcolm says. "It was more important to do things right. Reputation is everything." —*B.D.S.*

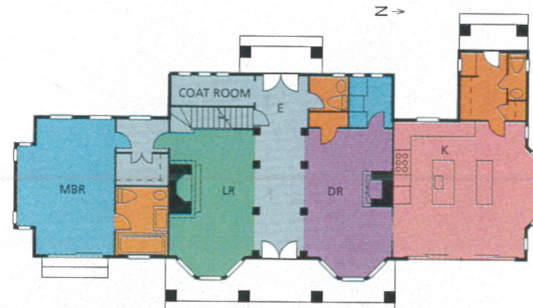
the sky, and an uncomplicated summer-house program.

"The house is essentially a central hall with extensions on two sides," Silverio says. Bracketed by two fireplaces, the hall contains dining and living spaces and is brightened by a central light well that rises to the rooftop cupola. The kitchen wing reaches toward the south, a ground-floor master suite to the north. The second floor, tucked under the steep, many-dormered roof, holds girls' and boys' suites for the owners' grandchildren. (Grown children share a separate cottage on the property; a bunkhouse handles overflow guests and slumber parties.) Interior finishes follow a classic Maine cottage formula: fir strip flooring, vertical grain fir trim and wainscot, local-stone fireplaces. "It's kind of an unbeatable combination," Silverio says, "Oriental rugs and fir paneling, white-tile baths. If you're operating on a little bit of a historical reference, there are a lot of mistakes that don't get made."

To hear the architect tell it, his task was as much to channel a design as to generate one himself. "There was this sort of inevitability about it," he says. "It was almost as if it knew what it wanted itself, and you just fell in line with it." Silverio is too modest. In its tapered columns and chimneys, its rhythmic repetition of angular forms, this interpretation of the Shingle cottage bears the unmistakable mark of his distinctive style. Still, with its red-cedar skin already bleaching to the silver of island granite and its great sheltering roof pulled down low against the sea wind, the house seems very much determined by its site. "If you can surrender to the will of the place," Silverio says, "then you're



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given clues, hints, and there are a zillion things you don't have to think about, because you're on the path."

The builders' path, though complicated by distance, time, and tides, led to the same goal: a house worthy of both its extraordinary site and the effort required to build it there. "All of us had the same feeling," Silverio says. "We all knew what we were after." When you take the trouble to build a ship in a bottle, you build the best ship you can. ■

**Project Credits:** Builder: Boothbay Home Builders, Boothbay, Maine; Architect: John Silverio, Lincolnville, Maine; Living space: 3,580 square feet; Site: 30 acres; Construction cost: \$396 a square foot; Photographer: Brian Vanden Brink (except where noted). ■ **Resources:** Bathroom/kitchen plumbing fittings/fixtures: Kohler, Circle 400; Doors: Marvin, Circle 401; Garage doors: General Door, Circle 402; Hardware: Jado, Circle 403; HVAC equipment: Burnham, Circle 404, Runtal, Circle 405, and Wirsbo, Circle 406; Lighting fixtures: Juno, Circle 407 and Rejuvenation, Circle 408; Windows: Marvin, Circle 409.