

Maine Home

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PROFILE | ELAINE MURDOCH



For nearly three decades, Elaine Murdoch has been applying the knowledge she gained in art school and working various hands-on jobs to designing highly functional kitchens, bathrooms, and more.

DESIGNING THE HEART OF A HOME

FROM MOSCOW TO MAINE, ELAINE MURDOCH DESIGNS KITCHENS THAT PERFORM AND BATHROOMS WITH STYLE

“I call this the jewelry of the house,” Elaine Murdoch says as she lightly touches a piece of metalwork. We’re in the kitchen of a Falmouth home that she designed in 2014, and Murdoch is walking me through the smaller details. The hardware, such as faucets and drawer knobs, is one of her favorite parts of a home. As she describes the origins of the home’s adornments, her own silver earrings move with each nod, as though affirming her points.

As a kitchen and bath designer, Murdoch is responsible for all the hard goods that go into these rooms, including flooring, tile, plumbing fixtures—anything that is part of the building, really—as well as the soft goods, a category that includes pillows, rugs, and furnishings. “The way we explain it to clients is this: if you pick up a house and shake it, what falls out are the soft goods, and what stays put are the hard goods,” says Sue Mendleson, an architect at Knickerbocker Group who has been collaborating with Murdoch for the last decade. Murdoch, Mendleson says, is a rare find in their world. She has an eye for color, a deep knowledge of cabinetry and millwork, and a history working with the “fine-tuned details of the house.” She can plan out the plumbing on your custom shower and pick out a beautiful bath mat, too. “A kitchen and bath designer is a specialist,” Murdoch adds. Think of it this way: Murdoch is like a heart surgeon. She can treat the rest of the body, if necessary, but she has chosen to focus on the beating pulse of a house: the kitchen.

Like any specialist, Murdoch speaks with great intensity and attention to detail when it comes to her profession. For this particular project, she had more than the typical pipes

and vents to consider—she also had to sculpt a space for a striking aquarium by New England Aquarium Services, a full-service company that grows, designs, installs, and maintains aquariums. The homeowner loves scuba diving, and the tank allows him to bring that particular passion into the center of his home (and, even if he can’t be out in the water, he can gaze at the ocean from his kitchen and dream about its depths). Murdoch and her team at Knickerbocker Group decided to encase the structure in wood and continue with floor-to-ceiling paneling along the entrance length of the wall. To “corral” the huge space, they added framed crown molding on the ceiling, which helped to define and separate the working parts of the kitchen from the other features, including the butler’s pantry and the bay windows.

“You have to be able to think very mathematically and geometrically,” she explains as she leads me through the traffic patterns of the kitchen, pointing out how, thanks to Knickerbocker’s subtle work, there is a clear (yet entirely unobtrusive) flow to the space. “You have to see angles and symmetry and how they work together,” she says before pointing out the placement of a mirror, which brings an ocean view into a tucked-away corner of the butler’s pantry. In this kitchen, there are two bay windows on each end, allowing visitors in the driveway to peer through the house to the endless water beyond. But these big, gorgeous old windows aren’t placed in line with each other. “I have to ask myself: How do I make the room look logical? You balance the windows through a trick of the eye,” Murdoch explains.

While her demeanor is polished, I get the sense that

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From the butler's pantry (left) there is a beautiful view of the Casco Bay islands.

Murdoch hides a huge reserve of energy. She's fast and precise, moving from the kitchen island to the butler's pantry with the kind of surety and swiftness I associate with chefs at work. It's hard to imagine her covered in speckles of clay or striding around a lumberyard, although I know she's done both in her long, varied career. "When I started, there was no formal career path," she says. Twenty-seven years ago, when she began working as a designer, there was no such thing as a Certified Master Kitchen and Bath Designer (CMKBD) or a Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS), two credentials that Murdoch can add to her name. "If you ask a bunch of kitchen designers about their previous careers, you'll get some funny answers. I used to be a potter. I know a former ballroom dancer, a sheet metal worker, a teacher."

Murdoch has always been in touch with her creative side. A Massachusetts native and Maine "summer kid" with family ties to Bristol, she attended the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where she found herself drawn to the tactile nature of pottery. "And I discovered I like to burn things!" she adds, laughing. She spent hours firing pottery in massive kilns, and more hours at a gaffers bench manipulating molten glass. After she graduated, she moved to Maine and built a pottery studio behind her mother's house. To supplement her income, she picked up part-time work at a lumberyard. "I discovered I really enjoyed being around all the building materials," she says. "I would see people come in who needed help with their kitchens. I grew up watching Julia Child, and I can cook, so I thought, Well, I could do kitchen design."

Her first full-time job in the field was at a company that imported German cabinetry. From there, she went to work at a cabinet shop, where her boss insisted that she learn every step of how each piece was made. Several years later, her career took her to Russia, where she worked for a Danish design company and her husband worked at the American Embassy. It was the early 1990s, and the country had just opened up to outsiders. "I lived there for three Russian winters," she recalls. "Though to be fair, they were really about the same as Maine." In Moscow she renovated pre-revolutionary urban buildings—elegant structures converted to communal housing during the Soviet era. As she modernized these homes in the process of reconverting them to private residences, she began collecting bits and pieces of home "jewelry" that had been cast aside. The old apartment buildings had air ducts that ran through the entire structure, which opened into each room with a small, four-inch brass grate. "They're just ordinary things," she admits, "ubiquitous in those old buildings, but each one had its own pattern. I would squirrel them away. Those are the kind of collectables I hold on to—construction collectables."

I imagine her home must be filled with these things, small objects made by hands, pieces of houses and scraps of history. It is, she reveals. "My husband and I both gravitate toward old iron works. Corkscrews and hooks, nutcrackers, anything that was made by hand with iron," she says. Although her design aesthetic tends toward "clean lines and modern houses," evidenced in this Falmouth kitchen with its sweeping lines and stainless-steel fixtures, she lives surrounded by tactile objects that carry the patina of age. But for Murdoch, these two impulses don't create a contradiction, and neither do her seemingly divergent interests in painting and geometry. There is no left brain/right brain split here. Murdoch is a woman who can tell you the exact size of drain you might need in your shower. She can also help you cull through the subtleties of paint shades and hues. She kept old pieces of Soviet stairwells, yet she also talks animatedly about the future of 3-D modeling technology and how it will change design. Her intellectual and personal passions have been arranged around one central theme: the home. Whether it's old or new, modern or contemporary, what matters is balance, harmony, and, after the work has been done, creating the perfect space to live out all of one's contradictory impulses. **MH+D**