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ROSECLIFFE

No other name would do for this once plain summer cottage that has been turned into a Carpenter Gothic masterpiece. By Virginia Wright.

TO sailors on Boothbay Harbor, it's a romantic porch-and-gables fantasy nestled atop a bed of granite and fragrant pink rugosa roses. How could it be named anything but Rosecliffe?

"The house used to be called Rock Ledge," says Cornelia Covington Smithwick, a Jacksonville, Florida, interior designer who, with husband Walter, lives at Rosecliffe half the year. "But when I found it in the summer, there was a profusion of roses in bloom. I had to change the name."

Then, too, a name as sober as Rock Ledge couldn't possibly serve a dwelling about to be so dramatically transformed. The house the Smithwicks bought in 1996 was an unremarkable vinyl-sided two-story with superb harbor views. The home they've made is a

lacy Carpenter Gothic cottage, a bit of enchantment from Cornelia's imagination made real by Martin Moore of Coastal Designers and Consultants on Southport Island.

Introduced to Boothbay Harbor years ago by several Jacksonville friends who summered there, the Smithwicks had three priorities when they purchased Rosecliffe: They wanted a porch — not a wimpy, narrow thing where a single chair hinders circulation, but a *real* porch, wide and long, where meals are enjoyed and Sunday papers are spread out and lingered over. They also wanted to remove the living room's black-painted brick fireplace, which awkwardly occupied a corner, and replace it with one that would be a focal point and accommodate uninterrupted cozying. Finally, they wanted to remodel in the Victorian

The breathtaking view of Boothbay Harbor is about all the imaginative homeowners retained of the cottage they bought a few years ago. To lend the place a special charm, they stripped off its vinyl siding, added a proper porch, and imbued the house with all manner of late Victorian details.

Carpenter Gothic style, whose lancet arches, steeply pitched gables, and ornamental trim and molding were popular in mid-nineteenth-century New England. Inspired by medieval English cathedrals, American carpenters took details designed for stone and executed them in wood. These flourishes have a frankly handcrafted quality — perfect for a seaside getaway.

"I had fallen in love with the style at Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard many years

before," says Cornelia in her soft Southern lilt. "It's fanciful, whimsical, and fun — and ecclesiastical. That's very important because this is my spiritual retreat."

Rosecliffe is a Gothic immersion that begins at the arched wooden garden gate and does not stop once you cross the rose-draped threshold. This "total look," as Martin Moore describes the sum of his and Cornelia's expressions, began with the decision to save the existing structure, parts of which date back to the 1920s. "I

liked the old feeling inside the house," Cornelia says. "I adored the uneven floors and the multi-level stained wood ceiling. I didn't want to lose that quaintness and authenticity. We could have torn the house down and built whatever we wanted, but we would not have achieved rooms with cozy nooks and crannies. That aesthetic, along with the views, is so special that I knew we could transform the exterior and massage the interior."



MASSAGE they did — every detail. An architectural designer and an interior designer make a dynamic combination. “Cornelia and I worked together very closely,” says Moore, who has executed similarly dramatic transformations for homeowners up and down the East Coast. “It’s a process of a thousand questions. You have to imagine sitting there and seeing how the flow works. You have to consider the owner’s lifestyle and how they entertain.”

Cornelia expected the house to be filled with family and friends six months a year or more. Good circulation, especially to the new porch that would be a magnet, was essential. Thus, a kitchen door opening onto the porch dining area is a deceptively simple bit of ingenuity, the kind that is rarely appreciated day to day, but would be sorely missed if the cook suddenly found herself having to negotiate the living room in order to serve a meal.

Floral-patterned linen and colorful heirloom china give the living room a relaxing, lived-in quality. The Gothic arch of the new fireplace — which is reiterated in the built-in cabinetry — accentuates the antique quality of the room. Brightly painted beadboard in the pantry and kitchen (opposite) imparts a similar feel, while a room tucked up into the eaves boasts an antique-looking window that frames an invigorating water view.





Climbing roses range over doorways, well-placed lawn chairs catch the fragrance of beach roses, and a wonderful cottage garden bordering a fieldstone path looks decades older than it really is. Inside and out, Rosecliffe is a tour de force.

The L-shaped kitchen is a cheery space with original beadboard ceiling and walls, the latter coated in a sunshiny yellow paint from England ("It's a historical paint color I love and I couldn't find it in America," Cornelia explains). The ambiance is in the details. It might take guests a moment, for example, to spot the refrigerator. The appliance's white beadboard veneer matches the cabinets, which in turn were designed by Moore with legs and inset doors to "look more like furniture." Even the oven hood is covered in beadboard, and its scalloped trim echoes the skirt beneath the cabinets on the opposite wall. In the kitchen, too, are the lancet arches (the cabinet door paneling) and carved quatrefoils (atop the oven hood) that are Rosecliffe's unifying motifs.

FULL and inviting as an overstuffed pillow, the living room was remodeled with Cornelia's inherited collections of black and red transferware and antique Staffordshire dogs in mind. Shelves and a china cabinet employ

Gothic arches. The new fireplace, a wide arch made of local beach rocks, is set into a wooden mantel stained to match the original paneling on the walls and ceilings. A repetitive Gothic arch pattern across the top of the mantel references architectural accents inside and out. Now centrally located, the fireplace is surrounded by plump sofas and chairs covered in romantic tea-stained floral linen. The upholstered coffee table-cum-ottoman, Cornelia's design, comfortably accommodates not only feet but also stacks of books and magazines.

Enormous windows look across the veranda to the harbor and Mouse Island, effectively bringing the outside in. Several people have asked why the Smithwicks did not replace the contemporary picture windows with traditional ones. Cornelia typically replies, "Well, I wasn't trying to make it *that* authentic." Given the view, it would be unthinkable not to have picture and large casement windows to maximize the ocean breeze.

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Rosecliffe

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Cornelia's antiques and mementoes drove the design in other rooms as well. "I didn't want anything serious. I wanted it to be a place where I could bring old family antiques, memorabilia, and fantasy together." Her mother's antique majolica was assigned to the rustic dining room, whose windows overlook a steeply terraced garden lush with rhododendrons and mountain laurel. A wild boar's head (Cornelia fondly calls it "the guest who came from Florida and stayed too long — the bore") and handmade twig dining chairs lend the feel of a country retreat.

Adjacent to the living room, a small sunroom has been christened the

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Snuggery. A love seat and the tea-table chairs are covered in a soft green and beige botanical print. The space is bright, yet soothing. "Everyone loves this room," Cornelia says. "It's perfect for reading and watching a movie."

For the kitchen and second-floor bedrooms, Moore designed windows whose oversized single-pane bottom sashes permit unobstructed views of the water. Smaller three-pane upper sashes, whose muntins provide true divided light, retain the character of vintage windows.

NATURALLY, the detail-oriented team of Moore and Smithwick made sure the views from each bedroom can be enjoyed without rising from bed. That's good, because these beds deserve occupants who linger. The master bedroom's four-post iron bed has a carved wooden headboard hand painted with hundreds of tiny roses against a black background. The guest room's masculine brown, white, and green color scheme evolved around a rustic headboard found in England. With its carved dentils and quatrefoils and its

spire-shaped posts, the bed is thoroughly Gothic. This room's faceted window arrangement cleverly gives the occupant a 180-degree view of the water.

The former attic is now the Fairy Aerie, a name inspired by the Smithwicks' grandchildren's favorite book, *Flower Fairies* by Cecily Barker. The children keep a collection of flower fairy books and miniature fairy statues in a sitting area dominated by a large Gothic casement window. Beadboard walls, painted Cornelia's favorite yellow, reflect the abundant natural light. Despite steeply slanted ceilings, Moore found room in the two bedrooms for small Gothic dormer windows, which meant a happy opportunity to indulge in more decorative bargeboard, or gingerbread, outside.

Though the sitting room is modest in size, the cross gable that was built to accommodate it contributes what may be, with the exception of the fabulous veranda of course, Rosecliffe's most significant exterior alteration. What was once a straight uninterrupted roofline now has multiple peaks and valleys that are in step with Carpenter Gothic flourishes. Besides bargeboard trimming, every gable is accented with fish scale shingles and a large quatrefoil ornament.

Landscaping, too, has gone from ordinary to sumptuous. Avid gardeners, Cornelia and Walter took their inspiration from the renowned Sissinghurst Castle Garden of Vita Sackville-West. From the driveway, the Gothic arch gate opens to a stone path, mossed with wooly thyme and winding gently among blossoms and ledge to a back door framed by cascading pale pink roses. With the help of Boothbay master gardener Gail MacPhee, they grouped plants by hue, so white blooms swirl into yellow, which swirl into blue, which swirl into pink and so on. "We are passionate about each little flower in each location," Cornelia says. "If anything comes up looking out of place, I immediately transplant it!"

Given this quest for perfection, one might wonder if Rosecliffe has created more work for the busy interior designer. But making someone else's sanctuary perfect is quite different from creating your own. One is work, the other is play. At Rosecliffe, Cornelia Covington Smithwick flexes her imagination, nourishes her spirit, and makes her dreams come true. □