

Maine Home

+ DESIGN

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NATURAL BEAUTY

A stunning Southport estate, a lake house on the grounds of a former summer camp in Otisfield

+ A TINY FLOATING CABIN OFF VINALHAVEN

Maine Home +DESIGN

75 Market Street

Suite 203

207-772-3373

www.mainehomedesign.com

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One side of a double staircase shows curved paneling and a mahogany railing and volute.

Several views (opposite) of intricate molding, interior trim, and paneling—much of which has hard-to-execute curves.





DESIGN IS IN THE DETAILS

Remarkable feats of craftsmanship in a Southport estate

by Debra Spark | Photography Irvin Serrano

Here's a word you don't hear applied to much new construction in Maine: *Rockefellerian*. It's how interior designer Tracy Davis of Portland's Urban Dwellings describes the Southport home that Knickerbocker Group of Boothbay and Portland built for Paul Coulombe, the former CEO of White Rock Distilleries. Coulombe has had enormous success in business, and his home is a reflection of that. "In Paul's eyes," says Davis, the home "was the fruits of his labor, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the reward for all the hard work he'd spent building a brand. It was a house for a man who had established his wealth." In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she observes, a man of means and industry, such as J.P. Morgan or one of the Rockefellers or the Vanderbilts, would have built a house entirely on his own terms. He would have known enough to look for quality and to hire the finest tradesmen. Coulombe's house is the twenty-first-century version of that: a big house built with a big budget and a recession-busting workforce of Maine's top talent. "There is a tradesperson behind each detail in this house," says Davis, "and that is the case from the smallest stone to the nails in the trim to the upholstery."

On the exterior, the home reads as a handsome shingle style, a grand cottage perched on a large stone ledge above the ocean. On the interior, and if not for the tremendous ocean views, the home might be something you'd find in old-world Manhattan: an elegant mansion entered through a foyer with a high vaulted ceiling and double curved staircase, including features like a

cherry-paneled study and a Versailles-inspired bedroom. But "God is in the details," as Mies van der Rohe liked to say, and it is the details that the contributors to the project are particularly proud of. Architect Rick Nelson of Knickerbocker Group says of Coulombe, "He was constantly asking us to push the envelope and asking us to make the details big and crisp. So it's not just the ornateness but the level of creativity."

For instance, the house has abundant wall paneling, complex moldings, curved stair railings, arched doorways, and intricate exterior trim. Alex Hamilton of Tidewater Millwork in Woolwich purchased a five-axis, computer-controlled router in order to work on the Coulombe residence. The router allowed Hamilton to produce in wood anything that Knickerbocker could design on the computer. Sometimes, though, even Knickerbocker's computer programs didn't suffice. Initially, the master bedroom ceiling was going to be a plaster ceiling with a curve, but Steve Malcom, owner/CEO of Knickerbocker Group, said to Coulombe, "I don't know. I think we need to do something more special." They settled on concentric circles with a medallion in the center. Because this required different planes to come together in a curve, Knickerbocker's team needed to borrow a software program from Bath Iron Works to draw the ceiling coffers (themselves compound curves) in such a way that the room could actually be built.

The substantial French limestone fireplace with elaborate moldings and curves in the living room is another example of intricate computer-aided design (CAD) software being executed

Perched on a stone ledge above the ocean, the Coulombe home references Maine's grand shingle-style "cottages," but with unconventional details like mahogany trim, a vanishing-edge swimming pool, and stone-walled hot tub.





“ THERE IS A TRADESPERSON BEHIND
EACH DETAIL IN THIS HOUSE.”



The home's extensive hardscaping includes stone patios, artfully placed boulders, and an outdoor living room with a towering rustic fireplace made of stones that range from 80 pounds to eight tons.





A bridge (above) of stainless-steel cables, galvanized posts, and cedar decking leads across a gap in the stone ledge where waves crash.

The master bathroom (opposite) features an oversized porthole window and cabinets designed by Tracy Davis of Urban Dwellings. Davis turned to some of the icons of European cabinetry—including Christopher Peacock and Clive Christian—for inspiration. The marble here is crema marfil. The stone was too heavy to use for the window frame, though, so the frame is faux-painted to look (and feel) like marble. Built-in toiletry shelves slide out from the paneling beside the mirrors.

by tradespeople. Knickerbocker prepared drawings based on Urban Dwellings' design and then sent the drawings to Europe, where the limestone was cut under the supervision of Nick Whatley of Topsham's Morningstar Stone and Tile. Once the stone was shipped to the States, Morningstar fabricated the fireplace and had the challenge of moving it into the house without a crane, as the ceiling had already been completed when it was time to install. Morningstar also received marble that had been handpicked and cut in Montreal and then assembled it into a floor mosaic for the dramatic entryway.

Faux painter Herb Clarke of Chameleon Coatings in Portland has produced a number of different finishes in his career, but never all in the same house, as he did for the Coulombe project. Having considered a leather ceiling for the study but then rejecting that idea because leather might eventually sag, the team chose to have Clarke finish the ceiling to look like leather. Clarke painted the vaulted ceiling of the cherry-paneled bar adjacent to the kitchen to resemble a wood grain called "burl matched." In the barrel-vaulted hall and domed rotunda that lead to the master bedroom suite, Clarke finished the walls to suggest suede. The same space has detailing on the moulding called "egg and dart," the egg-shape of which is finished in gold leaf. The bathrooms are largely made of marble, but where the weight of marble might be too much (as on an oversized porthole window) or where wood was originally installed and then rejected, Clarke faux-painted marble and finished it with a glaze, so it not only looks like marble, it feels like marble. Clarke even painted faux brick and soot inside a decorative fireplace, and that by no means completes the list.

Indeed, each participant on the project has his or her own long list of accomplishments. There are cabinets built by Walter Shea of Knickerbocker Group in every room of the house. Most are complicated by paneling and atypically large moulding. Some cabinets have the additional challenge of curved pieces, as do the bathroom vanities and the etched-glass doors that curve inward in the kitchen bar. Other particulars include braided ceiling detailing in the kitchen bar, medallions on the study paneling, gas lanterns for the exterior, and intricate wooden scrollwork that looks decorative but in fact hides an air-conditioning vent. For the living room, Architectural Openings of Somerville, Massachusetts, built curved mahogany doors which, when opened, retreat into two pockets in the walls. Because the doors receive the rough weather off the water, the team even thought to design a narrow stone trough for drainage in front of the door. It's not something a person would even notice, but it serves a useful purpose and is something the team decided on only "after a lot of head scratching," architect Nelson says. Other small decisions are decidedly dramatic, such as the French notions that Tracy Davis picked for the wall of tufted shantung and woven golden silk into which the bed of the master bedroom is affixed.

On the exterior, too, details are everything, so although Knickerbocker Group and landscape architect Arek Galle (now of BETA Group in Rhode Island) had an overall vision that would transition seamlessly from the terrace to the property's stone ledge, there were a lot of specifics involving an outdoor living room, a vanishing pool, lawns, and an abundance of artfully placed boulders. "It took a lot of thoughtful design





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1. The mahogany ceiling of the sun porch.
2. Curved mahogany doors open onto a stone terrace. The exterior trim is as detailed as the interior.
3. The balcony balusters are one of the few elements in the house that aren't custom made.
4. A corner of the living room's French limestone fireplace with a curve and complex molding.
5. A detail of the master bedroom's molding.
6. A cremone bolt that Knickerbocker made for interior doors. The bolt allows the door to operate without a floor bolt to secure the door when shut.
7. The curved stone walls at the front entrance also curve outward.
8. An arched door leads to a guest suite. Here the paneling includes a shelf for flowers. The door is of mahogany with burl veneer panels.



Interior designer Tracy Davis describes the master bedroom (above) as “a fantasy come true.” Tufting, pleating, mitered corners, and French notions allowed her to achieve the look she wanted for the fabric wall behind the bed. Knickerbocker Group had to borrow a software program from Bath Iron Works to draw the ceiling coffers in such a way that they could actually be built. The 24-karat-gold and crystal chandelier was crafted in France and commissioned for the house.

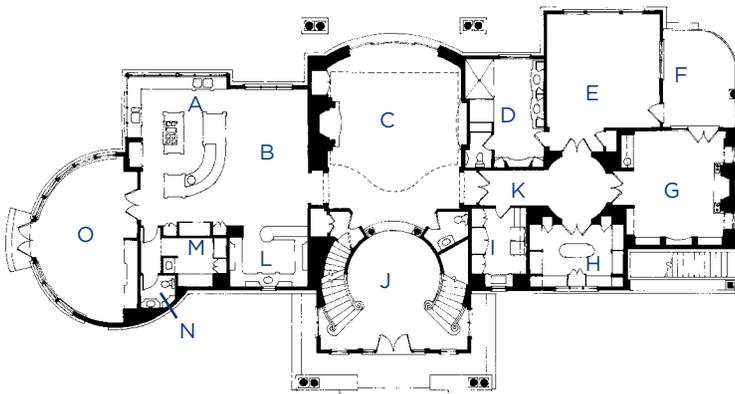
The rotunda (opposite) leads into a cherry-paneled study with a ceiling faux-painted to look like leather. The inlaid design in the rotunda floor is made of seven woods, including ebony, maple, mahogany, rosewood, and walnut. The walls are finished to suggest suede, and the trim under the molding is called egg and dart, the egg-shape of which is finished in gold leaf.







First Floor

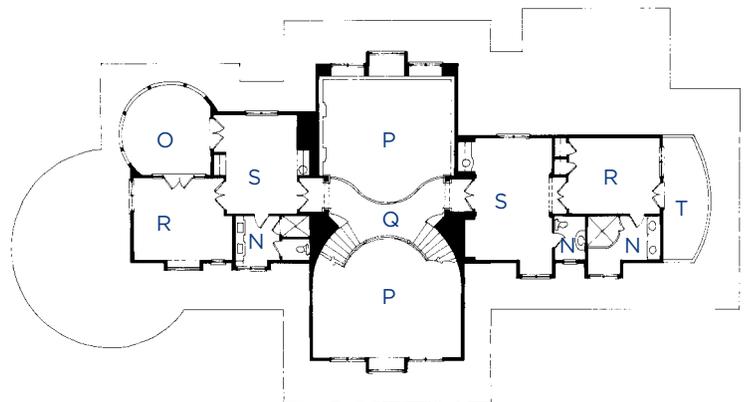


- A Kitchen
- B Dining Room
- C Living Room
- D Master Bath
- E Master Bedroom
- F Deck
- G Study
- H Dressing Room
- I Laundry
- J Entry Foyer
- K Gallery
- L Bar
- M Pantry
- N Bathrooms
- O Porches
- P Open to Below
- Q Balcony
- R Bedrooms
- S Sitting Room
- T Balcony

The "crown jewel" of the living room (opposite), says interior designer Tracy Davis, is the French limestone fireplace with elaborate moldings. The late-1800s Parisian mirror is finished in gold leaf. The living room palette was based on a few signature fabrics, and the balcony above leads to two guest suites. The home's formal entry is in the background.

The backside of a rustic fireplace (above) is at left. At right is an outdoor bar with two televisions, a sink shaped like a martini glass, and eaves that hide a heating system.

Second Floor



The front entry with a gambrel roof and Palladian-style window. The paneling in and around the mahogany front door signals the abundant paneling within the home.

A cannon at sunset points out to sea (opposite).





in terms of developing a sequence of spaces," Galle says. The challenge was also in developing different views. For instance, from one angle, Galle wanted to minimize the chimney of a towering rustic fireplace, but from the hearthside, he wanted the full drama of the "massive character piece." Galle and stonemason Dan Ucci went into the woods to find the stones, the smallest of which was 80 pounds and the largest eight tons. Meanwhile, J.C. Stone in Jefferson supplied material for all the exterior fabricated stone work save the cobblestone driveway, which was done by Dan Eaton's Landscape Services in Camden. The choice of vegetation was focused on establishing vistas and defining outdoor rooms with a mix of indigenous and ornamental plant material. Stonemason Ucci says his work was similarly conceived: "I set the stones in a certain way to accent the floors or trees or walkway." The notion that all aspects of the house would seamlessly work together extended to items that it might be hard to imagine people would even think to think of, such as the interior color of the swimming pool, which was matched to the color of the surrounding ocean.

Says Coulombe of the final product, "I really wanted to make a statement.

The house reflects what I like. I like to be dressed up. I like to entertain." To this end, he says he always wanted a formal Maine house. As for the project as a whole, Malcom says Coulombe was a man who "had the resources to allow us to do something we don't usually get to do." In the end, the property was a four-year project and included two guesthouses, a garage, and a barn, as well as some complete surprises like heaters in the eaves of the outdoor bar to keep those sitting at the bar warm, a television set that projects through the surface of a large bathroom mirror, and a faux-painted cloudy sky in the basement movie theater. The titans of twentieth-century industry weren't typically known for their modest homes, and so it goes for the twenty-first century. But for the team who did the work, the Coulombe house was simply a challenge and a pleasure. As Malcom says, "Paul gave us the opportunity to dream big and do things we'd never tried before. It was so much fun." **MH+D**

For more information, see Resources on page 160.

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