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SEA LIFE

Replacing a childhood summer home with a year-round beach house family gathering spot takes vision and collaboration.

BY DIANE M. STERRETT PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAT REA



On a clear day you can see all the way to Block Island.

W

hen Ray and Nancy Coulombe decided their family summer cottage in Green Hill dating from the 1920s had to go, they knew they wanted to replace it with a real Rhode Island beach house that would become a gathering spot for their growing family.

"We didn't want a Florida house on a Rhode Island beach," Ray says. "So we started looking around for architects who were in tune with beach architecture. We also wanted an architect who was open to a collaborative team approach with us and the builder."

After a thorough interview process, they selected **Azzinaro Larson Architects** of Westerly. "We didn't feel they would push us their way, and they showed enthusiasm



TOP: Red cedar shingles were bleached and dipped in stain at the factory to withstand the harsh elements. "They'll never rot in Ray's lifetime," Larson says. OPPOSITE TOP: Stones for the fireplace surround were gathered from the beach nearby, mimicking the look of the old cottage's fireplace. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The open kitchen and generous pantry make cooking for family gatherings easy and fun.

for the project, studying the site and taking pictures," Nancy says.

"We're open minded and we work in a studio atmosphere, so everyone shares their input. We don't shut any ideas out," principal Paul Azzinaro, registered architect, says.

In an unusual approach, both the homeowners and architects interviewed builders and assessed their plans together to find the one that understood their collaborative vision.

"The whole process, from them interviewing us to us interviewing the builders together, I don't think I've ever had a residential project go this smoothly. I think that's part of its success, really, when the client has a good handle on what they want and you listen, that's where it all begins," says Paul Larson, A.I.A. (American Institute of Architects) and project manager.

Ray and Nancy had a wish list for their new home just steps away from the beach: maximize the views and take full advantage of the property, flexibility to close off the upstairs when just the two of them were there, a big bright open family/kitchen room, comfortable gathering spaces, and easy maintenance.

"One thing I kept telling Paul Larson was this is a beach house, I didn't want anything formal," Nancy recalls. "I said I wanted a pantry, a big island, and to be able to have more than one person cook in kitchen. He was so good at listening."

Larson subscribes to the 'form follows function' principle. "If the client moves in and the house





doesn't work for the way they live, the project is a failure. So once you get your function and your circulation paths established, how spaces relate to each other, then the form of the house starts to take shape."

That called for many sketches, floor plans and 3D models. The plans grew organically, starting with putting the garage on the north side because it doesn't need a lot of light and growing from there, thinking about where to put the public spaces for best views versus private spaces such as bedrooms.

"That's when the plans started to grow. We envisioned more windows and more light starting to come in and building higher to get ocean views and the landscape east and west, that's how we arrived at that little turret at the top," Larson explains. "The whole objective was to create rooms that open up to the views and make it abundant with sunlight to give it that contemporary beach house feeling."

Nautical touches such as the widow's walk lookout turret, a large porthole window that sheds light into the second floor gathering area, and the third floor open loft playroom were on the homeowners' wish list. They also asked the architects to somehow work in a bit of a lighthouse look,



TOP: The master bedroom has unimpeded views of Block Island Sound and a second story deck to enjoy it from. **BOTTOM:** The upstairs sitting room is an ideal gathering place for siblings to catch up with each other. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** A windowed three-story staircase resembles a lighthouse look. **OPPOSITE TOP:** Soothing colors and decor give the bath a relaxing feel.

which resulted in a tower with stacked windows up the staircase.

The results are stunning: the house is open and airy, views from the large hurricane impact windows draw you into the heart of the home, and Nancy's color palettes, inspired by the ocean, make you immediately feel relaxed and welcome.

They also wanted to be as green as possible, so they sited the house to maximize passive solar gain and installed a geothermal heating and air conditioning system. Icynene closed cell foam was chosen for insulation.

Nancy and Ray are more than pleased. "They exceeded our expectations. I don't think we could have conceived of a place like this," Ray says.

Living there just nine months, they've already had several family functions. The open kitchen/dining/living room has fit more than 20 people comfortably. "We have our kids, their spouses, a fiancé, two dogs, and one baby. We can congregate downstairs with our friends, and our kids have a family room with a kegerator and another deck upstairs and the youngest can be up in the third floor playroom," Ray explains.

This is one family summer home sure to be enjoyed for generations. ■



Architects: Paul A. Azzinaro, R.A. Principal, Paul E. Larson, A.I.A., Partner (Project Architect), John H. Masson IV, Architect Associate, John D. Carter, Architect Associate, 85 Beach St., Westerly, 596-6669, azzinarolarsonarchitects.com, see ad page 94

Builder: Stephen Sullivan, Inc., Peace Dale, 789-1158, stephensullivaninc.com

Kitchen: Apex Kitchens and Baths, Middletown, 847-1532, apexkitchensandbaths.com, see ad page 54

Flooring: Carlisle Flooring, Stoddard, NH, 603-595-9663, wideplankflooring.com

Landscaping: Masson Landscaping, Inc., South Kingstown, 789-1605

Marvin Windows: Ring's End Lumber, Niantic, CT, (800) 303-6526, ringsend.com