



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF MCNAMARA

OF SENSE AND SIMPLICITY


ARCHITECT STUART DISSTON EMBRACES NATURE AS HIS MUSE TO INCORPORATE THE SOFT LINES OF THIS MODERNIZED BEACH HOUSE IN WESTPORT, CT TEXT **LOUIS POSTEL**





PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF MCCLAWARA



A photograph of a kitchen sink area. In the foreground, a dark wooden bowl filled with various vegetables, including mushrooms, green beans, and asparagus, sits on a light-colored countertop. To the right of the bowl is a modern, high-arched faucet with a brushed metal finish. The background shows a window with light-colored curtains, through which some greenery is visible. The overall lighting is soft and natural.

The water streaming past the open gates of this 60-acre millpond no longer powers a colonial paddlewheel. Nevertheless, the current continues to stir one's emotions about this special site: the pond, marsh and ocean; the beach plum- and bayberry-covered sand; and, perhaps most of all, the low-key cottage nestled in the midst of all this.

How did the architect's Shaker-influenced, modernist approach to the cottage's renovation and augmentation remain faithful to the spirit of that long-gone paddlewheel – that gentle partnership between man and nature that daily ebbs and flows with the tide?

The owner, most critically, wanted to maintain the original, simple cottage spirit of the house. Commensurately, Stuart Disston, architect for Austin Patterson Disston in Southport, CT and Quogue, NY, found unique ways to honor that simple wish.

Yet, simplicity is hardly that simple to achieve.

Of all the interior spaces, it's the kitchen that perhaps best expresses what Disston meant when he said that simplicity was a reductive process, a matter of carefully examining what to keep and what to let go of. Giving way to the living room on one side and a mudroom and laundry on the other, the kitchen has modern concrete countertops brought into focus by a stainless range hood. All the shelving above counter height is wide open to the sea breezes that gently lift the roman shades of sheer linen. What's more, there are no ugly brackets holding up the wooden open shelves; stainless rods prove to be a far more elegant solution.



PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCY HILL

"Simple is more a reductive process, a matter of what to take out and what to leave in," explains Disston about his multiple award-winning project. "Simplistic means not putting much thought behind what you're doing."

But thought there was. One of 15 summer houses in a Westport, CT colony established around the turn of the 20th century, the house had to-die-for views, but no road access, heat or insulation. So, for starters, Disston had to remedy all of that, as well as move the cottage back from the beach onto 30-foot pilings, get the foundation up to code and add a porch.

"Normally, we would have had to wheelbarrow stuff to the site or hire a barge," says Disston. "Luckily for us, the state park was undergoing some sewage work, and we went in that way."

He doubled the cottage in size, while keeping the original footprint to within five feet, by adding a matching gambrel connected by an eyebrow; below this eyebrow on the inside is the staircase. Disston echoed the original fenestration and window mullions. The resulting exterior profile undulates like waving grass on sandy dunes. "We wanted to emphasize the soft lines of the house rather than the detailing of the trim," states Disston.

Those soft, clean lines can be seen throughout the interior as well. Gutted to the floors and ceilings, beams were left exposed in a meaningful gesture to tradition. Disston also did the flooring in Western fir and made the kitchen sink a traditional farmer's ceramic sink – additional nods to the original, turn-of-the-century period.

Now, every summer, when the homeowner and his family make their way back to this cottage-like beach home, it's as if the in-rushing waters of the millpond mimic a simple "Glad you're back, everyone!" ■



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Lights | Pottery Barn Knobs | Wooden
Shaker Cabinet Paint | Benjamin Moore
Sage Island | Antique Chestnut Countertops
and Sinks and Fireplace Surround |
Pre-cast Concrete by Get Real Surfaces
NYC Cabinets | Custom, Joshua Friedman
Cabinetry, New London, CT Refrigerator
Traulsen Stove | Dynasty, a Division of Jade
Range Dishwasher | Bosch Stove Hood
| Best Faucets | Chicago Faucets, Danville, VA
Mounted Microwave | GE Profile