

JERSEY SHORE HOMES

Smaller Space, Big Design

Creating A Collector's Cottage of Art, Books, and Water Views

by Christine Menapace • photographs by Peter Rymwid



Above: Bob and Susan Brecht's waterfront cottage on Riverside Drive in Pine Beach.

Opposite page: The living room features red oak floors, wide moldings, a gorgeous tiled fireplace, charming window seats, built in cabinets, and several bookcases.

While the rest of the world watches Prince William and Kate Middleton tie the knot on April 29, Bob and Susan Brecht of Pine Beach will be quietly celebrating their own fortieth wedding anniversary. The occasion marks not just a happy lifetime together, but also a lifetime spent collecting books, artwork, and other eclectic finds—often bought as presents for each other. “It’s been a long, winding, oddball road,” says Susan of their décor. With furniture and statement pieces from India, Africa, China, the Caribbean, and across the U.S., “our collection is rather bizarre to most people,” adds Bob. “We’re not Ethan Allen folk,” jokes Susan.

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The dining room.

Yet when it came time to renovate their 1930s waterfront cottage at 419 Riverside Drive on the Toms River, they joined forces with architect Cate Comerford (profiled in our Spring 2008 edition) and kitchen designer Jim Dove and managed to blend all their seemingly mismatched treasures into a seamless design of remarkable coherence and beauty. Today, the house stands as testament to how stunning results can be achieved when one prioritizes quality, thoughtful design, and workmanship over simple quantity of space.

Susan, a senior housing consultant, was inspired when she heard architect Sarah Susanka speak on the “Not So Big House” concept, a design and construction philosophy that recommends decreasing square footage by about a third but using that same budget to incorporate higher end, artful, and well planned features that make a home not only more functional and attractive, but also appear surprisingly bigger. When Susan and Bob found Comerford, an Ocean Grove architect who subscribes to the philosophy, they knew it was a perfect match. “It was just a marriage made in heaven,” comments Bob. “She ‘got’ everything we

wanted.” A collaborative creative process evolved into a solid friendship. “It was a dream job,” concurs Comerford, “they were dream folks.”

Bob inherited the house from his parents, who bought it in 1981. His mother had grown up in Island Heights, where her father was a boat builder, and Bob spent many summers vacationing in the communities just across the river from the view he now enjoys. “It was magical,” he recalls of his boyhood adventures on the Jersey Shore. “My sister and I would arrive down here and immediately take off our shoes. I spent time on Money Island, named for Captain Kidd’s treasure. But believe me, it’s not there. I dug up every inch.”

Though Bob’s parents, as well as Susan and Bob, had their homes in Philadelphia, a friend of Bob’s mother let her know about the waterfront Pine Beach house as soon as it was available. The friend rather poetically asked her, “Would you like to come back to the river?” When his parents bought the home, “it was a very happy event for my whole family,” says Bob.

Built by a stockbroker who left New York City during the depression to become a plumber and later mayor

of Pine Beach, the home was showing its age by 1989 when Bob and Susan took over ownership. Linoleum floors, a lack of insulation, outdated windows, and a square footage of just nine hundred, meant the home was far from Bob and Susan’s ideal. But seeing the potential, they sold their house in Philadelphia in 2005, moved into a smaller city apartment, and started planning the renovation of the Pine Beach bungalow with the intention of eventually moving there full time.

By the time they met Comerford, they knew what they wanted. They told her, “We are readers and art collectors. You have to give us three things—tons of windows for the views, bookcases, and spaces for art,” recalls Bob. Beyond that, they knew that they wanted the practicality of two bedrooms, two full baths, and the aesthetic of the Arts & Crafts movement that dominated the architecture of bungalows like theirs. “There are a lot of those houses in the community. We had always loved them,” says Susan. However, the couple didn’t want to recreate a home straight out of the era. “We wanted strong echoes but not replication,” says Bob. “We didn’t want the extreme darkness,” adds Susan.

Construction by Bayview Builders began in April 2008 and took an entire year. Some aspects of the layout were retained, such as Susan’s office at the front of the house, a fifteen by fifteen-foot living room, and a screen porch, but an addition of approximately nine hundred feet nearly doubled their space. Now the home has eight rooms, as well as a screen porch and deck, each interconnected and each acting as its own scenic panorama, with sunshine and colors spilling over from space to space. Line of sight is a large aspect of what makes the home work. Rooms flow into other rooms and there is only one place—a small six by nine office for Bob—where one cannot see the water. In fact, from Bob and Susan’s bed, they can wake to a breathtaking view of the river, obstructed only by a screen porch, which serves as the perfect spot to

relax at night. "It really makes the spaces seem larger than they are," observes Bob.

Many features of Craftsman design are incorporated into the home: gleaming red oak floors, wide moldings, a gorgeous tiled fireplace, charming window seats, built in cabinets and several bookcases, and of course, double and triple windows with expansive views of the river. Unlike traditional Craftsmen bungalows, though, moldings are painted white instead of stained, and the home was brightened and visually expanded with French doors, a relatively open layout, cut away "windows" in many walls, and cathedral ceilings in some rooms.

Enhancing this flow of rooms is a palette of warm gold, cool blue, pear-green, and brick red that extends throughout the home. Comerford also worked on interior design with the Brechts. The paint colors, while different from room to

room, are incredibly complimentary but subtle enough to not detract from the Brecht's impressive collection of art. In fact, before construction, Comerford asked the couple to identify the placement of all their artwork. "The lighting plan evolved from the art plan, which I thought was terrific," comments Bob.

Now lighted, sunken niches highlight paintings from Benton Spruance and Bette Leshner of Philadelphia, William Thon and Holly Ready of Maine, and LaRoche LaFitte of Paris. Two folk art carvings, allegedly smuggled out of Cote d'Ivoire, are also prominently featured in the home. While the couple say they are "not serious collectors," as they talk about each piece, it's clear they have an eye for art and that they are passionate about each work they own. "It makes me smile every time I look at it," Bob says of a vase crafted of African hardwoods by American artist Dick Codding, while

Susan talks about the vibrancy of the Maine art scene. Interestingly, some of their collection, like the works by Thon and LaFitte relate to boats, inspiring the question: Is someone in the house a sailor? "I sure am," laughs Bob. So it's as if the paintings, though bought years ago, were always destined for a coastal location.

But it's not just the artwork in this home that entices the eye. No matter where you look, there is a pleasing scene, be it an antique lantern softly casting light on a Persian rug or the warmth of a dark wicker love seat huddled up against a bright blue wall. The color design worked so well that the Brechts were able to use all their existing furniture, which saved money. Bob hunted down vintage and Craftsman style lighting, and his prize find, a large antique wrought iron lantern, makes a lovely focal point in a cut-out "window" above a doorway between the living room and

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the front porch.

Interestingly, the front porch, while completely winterized and essentially a front sitting room, was still designed to retain the look and feel of a true porch by incorporating walls with shingles and siding. The original window openings were kept as pass throughs to the kitchen and even the original threshold was

incorporated. "It's nice to think about all the times my parents and their friends walked across that threshold," says Bob. "We're very sentimental people," adds Susan.

In a nod to practicality, the couple laid a pathway of gorgeous blue slate at both entrances in the home—as well as in the bathrooms. With hints of copper and gold, the slate not only

hides dirt, but is a beautiful addition to the decor. Other upscale details, like a row of stunning handmade tile in each shower, a painted Kohler kitchen sink, and a raised bronze sink bowl in the guest bathroom are completely in keeping with the Not So Big House philosophy.

Indeed, Bob and Susan find the size of their house to be absolutely perfect. Susan, who works from home, even has a "corner" office with an L-shape of five windows that look out onto the river. "In the winter, the sun tells me when I should be quitting work," she jokes. Yet the square footage is perfect for having guests too, with the second bedroom located at the opposite end from the master bedroom, affording privacy. The kitchen, always the spiritual heart of a home, is also the actual center of the layout here. Thus, Susan never finds herself isolated from guests when cooking. "It's socially a very workable design," she says. "We had dreamed of this for years," she adds. "If I could hug this house, I would." ♦

For more information on the Not So Big House concept, visit www.notsobighouse.com. For Cate Comerford's site, visit www.catecomerford.com.



The front porch is completely winterized and essentially a front sitting room, but was designed to retain the look and feel of a true porch by incorporating walls with shingles and siding.