

Houzz Tour: Bright, Sun-Warmed New England Getaway

Country views, flexible living space and a just-right size make for a soothing, comfortable family retreat.

By Becky Harris, Houzz Contributor SEPTEMBER 3, 2012

When this family of seven let go of the charming yet drafty vacation home they shared with extended family, they wanted a different kind of getaway. All too aware of the exorbitant cost of heating a home in New England, they were easily persuaded by architect Stephanie Horowitz to build a “passive” house — one heated primarily by the sun. Horowitz is a principal architect at ZeroEnergy Design (ZED), a firm that specializes in energy-efficient architecture. “My clients wanted a home that was small, affordable, low maintenance and durable,” she says.

Houzz at a Glance

Location: The New England coast

Who gets away here: A family of 7

Size: 1,200 square feet; 2 bedrooms plus a sleeping loft, 2 baths plus separate tub room

That’s interesting: The home consumes one-tenth of the energy for heating compared to a similar new home built to code requirements.

Passive design makes the most of the sun; the house is oriented so that specially glazed, high-performance windows face south. With a tight envelope, the house is very well insulated and doesn’t leak heat.

However, the most important aspect of successful architecture is always livability, which in this case meant creating a comfortable house that took advantage of landscape views and was sized appropriately.

Thus, ZED created a flexible living space where one owner, a writer, could feel cozy and inspired when she comes here to work, where the family could host big parties and where they could all sleep comfortably without wasting square footage on the bedrooms. The result is a comfortable 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath retreat with vast beautiful agrarian views. And the house consumes less than 420 kilowatt-hours of electricity per month on average, a number that could go down to zero if the family opts for solar panels in the future.





The home's simple gable-roof structure, emphasized by playful red fiber cement siding on the ends, pays homage to the local rural architecture.



The south-facing side harnesses energy from the sun in the winter through specially glazed, high-performance windows and doors by Schuco. Cedar siding will weather naturally into a silvery gray.



Given the home's small footprint, the main living space needs to serve several functions and be flexible. In this floor plan, the center of the house incorporates the dining room, the kitchen and the living room spaces, and each end of the house contains one bedroom.

"This is more of a retreat than a vacation home," says Horowitz. While the writer in the family sometimes uses the house midweek as a studio, the whole family gathers here on weekends and during vacation weeks.



The iconic gable form and bold red color used outside appear again on opposite ends of the indoor living space. The exposed ductwork assists with the small amount of backup heat the family requires beyond the passive heat, as well as air conditioning for those rare days when natural ventilation can't handle a heat wave. Both come from a small, single system.

"We needed to create a sense of entry within the living space," explains Horowitz; the small, low walls to the left provide this.



To the left of the front door is an efficient mudroom with lots of storage by Poggenphol, a bench for putting on and taking off shoes, coat hooks and good spots for storing Wellies.



“The dining room table from their former family home is the one piece my clients wanted me to design around,” says Horowitz. She tucked a built-in banquette in a small bay, providing an ample dining space that doesn’t encroach upon the main living room.

The traditional trestle table, contemporary chairs and gooseneck barn scone give the room a touch of modern farmhouse style.



The thick entry wall offered an opportunity for a niche with shelves at the end of the table. The centerpiece flowers came from the meadows nearby.



“The challenge is in the balancing act between performance and design,” says Horowitz. This north-facing high-performance glass door was part of the balance between energy efficiency and livability; the family enjoys extensive farm landscape views through it.

Concrete floors absorb heat and then radiate it into the space, offsetting any loss of warmth from this door.

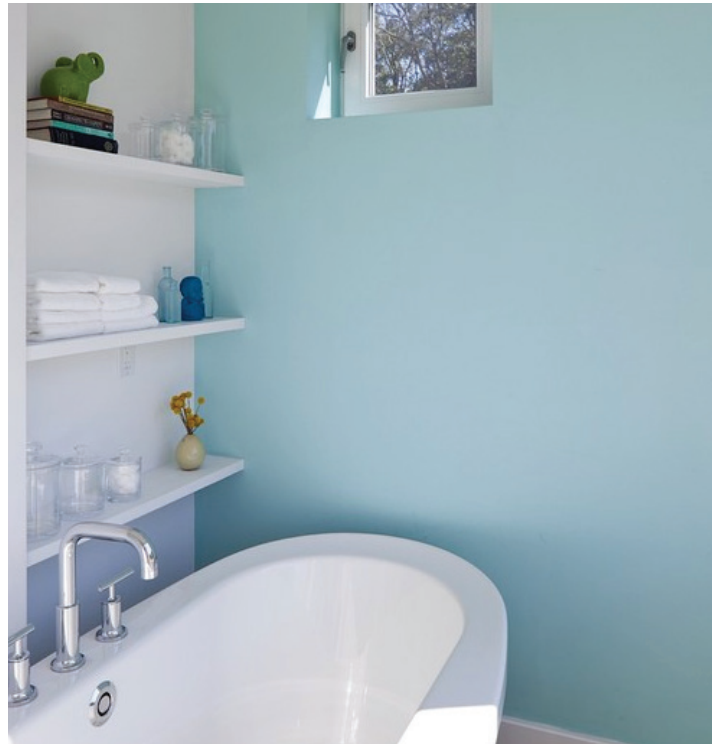


“We ordered the cabinets and the island from Poggenpohl’s Quick Ship line and then customized them,” says Horowitz. “We added casters to the island so that it can be moved out of the way when large groups are over. When working within such a small footprint, you have to maximize flexibility.”

The white walls, polished concrete floor and bright natural light keep the focus on the country views.



There is one room in the house that serves just one function: soaking. “Everyone in this family enjoys a tub, so that was an important part of the design,” says Horowitz. She created a separate sun-filled tub room that the whole family uses.

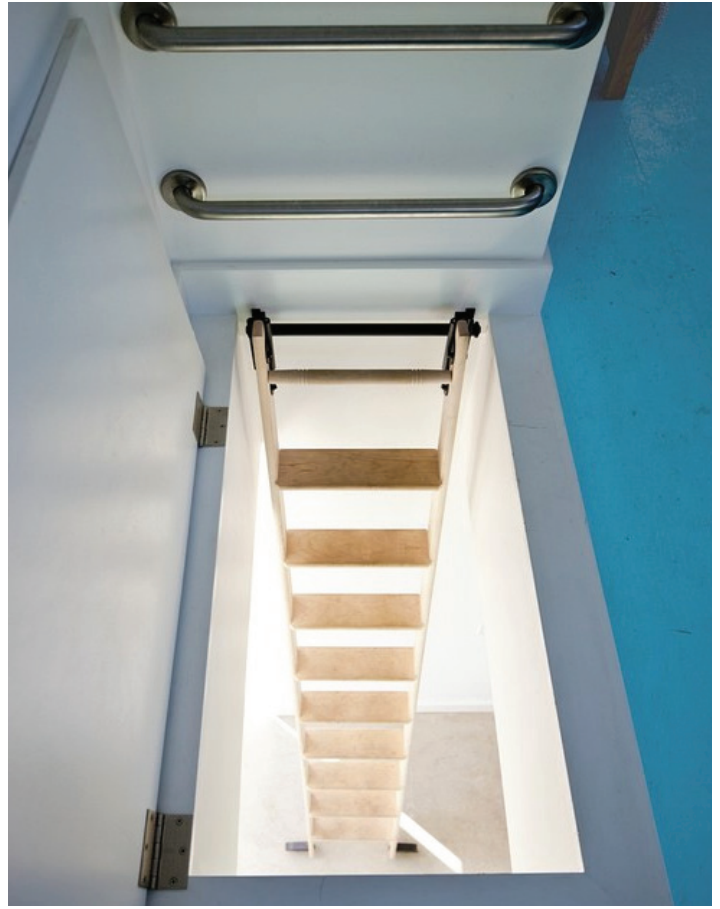


The master bedroom is “a room with a bed in it, and it functions quite well,” declares Horowitz. It was designed for a bed to fit into the corner, with a deep windowsill on the left designed to serve as a bedside table. The result is a cozy room with wonderful views.





A library ladder that angles out from the wall makes the climb to the sleeping loft much easier than a straight ladder would.



Up top, grab bars help climbers make it up those last few feet. “We tried to use off-the-shelf products throughout the house,” says Horowitz. A hinged board covers the hole in the loft floor for safety.



The loft overlooks the living space and has beds and a dedicated playspace for children. The floor is a subflooring product painted in a no-VOC floor paint by Ecos. “This paint comes in fun colors and is a great way to finish an attic space,” says Horowitz.