

Old-House Journal's

NEW OLD HOUSE

Building Character in Today's Homes

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Homecoming

Architect Sandra Vitzthum designs a new old farmhouse on the Massachusetts coast for a client with strong ties to this special place.

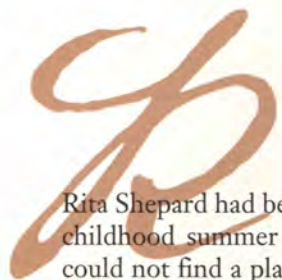
TEXT BY NANCY E. BERRY
PHOTOS BY CAROLYN L. BATES AND ERIC ROTH

Architect Sandra Vitzthum designed this vernacular New England farmhouse on the coast of Massachusetts. Open and enclosed porches offer water views. *Next page clockwise* Vitzthum replicated the mantel from her own 1840s Greek Revival house for the living room of Rita Shepard's new old house. A band of three six-over-one windows in the living room look out to Marblehead Harbor. The front staircase is a replica of a late nineteenth-century one found down the road at Shepard's grandmother's house. A bay window in the dining room offers an intimate alcove for Shepard and her partner John.









Rita Shepard had been looking for years for an old house in her childhood summer haven of Marblehead, Massachusetts, but could not find a place she was truly happy with. When the last parcel of buildable land on Peaches Point—the very outcropping where her grandmother and aunt had owned homes and where she spent her holidays—came up for sale, she jumped at the opportunity to purchase it. With only 12 hours to decide, Shepard made an offer from California where she was living at the time. Once she passed papers on the land, she began her search for an architect who could design her a house that would fit into this well-established New England neighborhood.

“I didn’t know what style I wanted, but I wanted the house to look as if it’s always been here,” says Shepard. She hired five architects to draw up conceptual designs. After reviewing various plans that weren’t quite right, Shepard’s partner, John, suggested that she contact Sandra Vitzthum, an architect he met while studying anthropology in Bali. “When we spoke, Rita couldn’t articulate a particular style, but she knew she wanted something simple and comfortable,” says Vitzthum. Shepard described a house that would allow for cross breezes, seasonal porches, and a floor plan that would take advantage of the property’s water views. She also described a house that would be cozy for just her and John, yet roomy for when her children are visiting.

Shepard also wanted the house to sit well in its location as well as with her neighbors, who would be in close proximity once the house was built. She didn’t want her new house to interrupt the historical integrity of the neighborhood. “This spot is great for Rita who is very social,” says Vitzthum. “She has extended family on the point and is very attached to this place.” They drove around Marblehead looking at various styles of architecture that had cropped up during its 300-plus year history. Shepard was drawn to the New England vernacu-

Left When Shepard is entertaining summer guests, the butler’s pantry between the kitchen and dining room is the perfect spot to set up the bar. Its dishwasher and refrigerator are disguised behind bead board paneling. Vitzthum incorporated glass-paned cabinetry and Kohler’s white farmhouse sink for a nineteenth-century look. The early twentieth-century reproduction lighting is by Rejuvenation. Wirsbo radiant flooring also warms the first floor, while reproduction radiators are found upstairs.

lar farmhouses with flourishes of the Greek Revival style. A direction for the house design had begun its course.

Order of the Day

Vitzthum is well versed in the vocabulary of the Greek Revival, having grown up in Montpelier, Vermont, where it is a prominent style. Today she lives in an 1843 Greek Revival farmhouse in that same town. “The Marblehead house has a diluted order of the Greek Revival. The elements and proportions are there but not the ornament,” she says. “The architrave has been taken away. The rake molding is simplified. There’s a discontinuous frieze across its gable end.”

Another important factor in the house design is the way it sits on the pie-shaped parcel that has partial water views in three directions: Salem Harbor, Marblehead Harbor, and the Atlantic. It was critical that the layout take advantage of these vistas. Vitzthum created a floor plan based on Frank Lloyd Wright’s pin-wheel designs. “The plan hides the massing visually and breaks down the space, making the house appear smaller than it actually is,” she explains. Wings extend off the main structure, offering peeks of the water from every room. “The house is meant to be seen three dimensionally—there’s no grand façade as you would see on a Georgian house,” she adds. The house also appears to have evolved over a long period of time, with open and enclosed porches “added” to the main structure. Vitzthum also kept in mind the

way the house would take advantage of the sun’s movement—the living room faces south toward Marblehead Harbor, the garage is tucked to the north, while the kitchen faces east to catch the bright morning rays.

Although the house is designed with traditional spaces (an eat-in kitchen, a dining room, and a living room), these rooms unfold into one another through custom-milled French doors, creating a circular flow—the enclosed porch also opens into both the living room and the dining room, while three sets of French doors in the living room lead onto the front open-air porch. “The house works beautifully for parties,” says Vitzthum. Although Shepard wanted the house to accommodate entertaining, she also needed private places where she can work (she is a professor of both archeology and anthropology) when guests are visiting. Vitzthum designed a study on the first floor that could be closed off from the rest of the house while



When Shepard couldn’t find the perfect antique sink and vanity, she asked Vitzthum to design this bird’s-eye maple bathroom “dresser” with a marble sink and countertop.

family and friends could enjoy the camaraderie the other rooms so amply afford.

Another important aspect of the design for Shepard was the kitchen. She loves to cook and have company while doing so. "I live in the kitchen," says Shepard. The room is spacious and has three windows over the sink that allow for ocean breezes and morning sun. "Kitchen dressers," resembling pieces of furniture, offer loads of storage. Off the kitchen is a butler's pantry, which has an additional sink and dishwasher as well as cabinets for china.

Design Details

Vitzthum created a hierarchy of space throughout the house with the use of molding profiles. Detailed cornices, baseboards, and window and door casings were incorporated into the formal rooms, though the pantry, kitchen, and bedrooms lack ornamentation or have simple bead board wainscoting. Vitzthum chose to use bands of six-over-one true divided single-paned windows for the kitchen, dining room, and living room. Though not historically accurate, these bands offer extensive views and cross-ventilation throughout the house. Vitzthum also incorporated familiar accents to the house, such as a replica of Shepard's grandmother's front staircase found just down the road. The fireplace mantel profile was created from a measured drawing of Vitzthum's own 1840s Greek Revival mantel.

RESOURCES

Homecoming

Shepard Residence
Architect: Sandra Vitzthum
Sandra Vitzthum Architect, LLC
46 East State Street
Montpelier, VT 05602
(802) 223-1806
www.sandravitzthum.com

Contractor: G. F. Peach, Inc
gfpinch@comcast.net
8 Stony Brook Rd.
Marblehead, MA 01945
(781) 631-5571

EXTERIOR

Windows: Marvin
www.marvin.com
Circle 11 on resource card.

Paint: Benjamin Moore
www.benjaminmoore.com
Circle 52 on resource card.

KITCHEN

Appliances: Heartland Stove
www.heartlandapp.com
Circle 53 on resource card.

Sink: Kohler
www.kohler.com
Circle 4 on resource card.

Faucet: Newport Brass
www.newportbrass.com
Circle 54 on resource card.

Flooring: Carlisle Wood Floors
www.wideplankflooring.com
Circle 55 on resource card.

Radiant Flooring: Wirsbo
www.wirsbo.com
Circle 56 on resource card.

Hardware: Emtek
www.emtekproducts.com
Circle 57 on resource card.

Architect's Intuition

Vitzthum approaches architecture with a touch of anthropology—her second concentration while studying at Princeton University. "I try to be as objective as possible when designing a house and ask how will the family use the space," she says. "I immerse myself in a place, study it, learn it. It is no longer a matter of ego when you are doing what is right for the place." This strong sense of place comes through in her designs. Vitzthum looks at the way the existing buildings interact with the street and the surrounding houses to create a design that is right for its location. "It's a matter of focusing on the place and the people. You need to put the design in the context of its surroundings," she says. "Architecture is like poetry—pieces fit together in a certain way to create beauty." She also believes style is a perfect fit between form and function—a perfect fit between people, places, and materials. And this vernacular farmhouse is right in step with the essence of this special place Shepard calls home. **NOH**

Previous page, top left Vitzthum designed an unfitted kitchen for Shepard with "kitchen dressers" that resemble pieces of furniture rather than contemporary kitchen storage. The farmhouse table was made from a felled tree found on the property. A red Heartland stove inspired by the past takes center stage. *Counterclockwise from bottom left* Vitzthum designed built-in china cupboards in the dining room inspired by nineteenth-century pattern books. Brass hardware is found on the French doors throughout the house. To give the illusion that the porch was added on at a later date, the interior walls are finished in exterior shingles. Designer Doors built these garage doors to resemble carriage house doors of an earlier era.

Kitchen

Lighting: Rejuvenation,
www.rejuvenation.com
Circle 58 on resource card.

BATHROOM

Sink, Faucets, Tub, Toilet: Kohler
www.kohler.com
Circle 4 on resource card.

Vanity: Deerfield Village Furniture
(802) 253-4448

Accessories: Horton Brasses
www.horton-brasses.com
Circle 59 on resource card.

INTERIORS

Lighting Conant Custom
www.conantcustombrass.com
Circle 60 on the resource card.

Doors: Marvin
www.marvin.com
Circle 11 on resource card.

Woodwork: Custom milled
Bruce La Rose
Barre, VT
(802) 479-0401

Hardware: Emtek
www.emtekproducts.com
Circle 57 on resource card.

Floors: Carlisle
www.wideplankflooring.com
Circle 55 on resource card.

Radiant Flooring: Uponor Wirsbo
www.wirsbo.com
Circle 67 on resource card.