



Only a Camp

TEXT BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN PHOTOS BY ETHAN MCNERNEY

When John Cole was approached by the Donnelly family to design a vacation home on a pond in Waterford, Maine, he was impressed by the simplicity and specificity of their needs. Jean Donnelly, in particular, determined the parameters of what was necessary and what was not.

“It’s only a camp. I don’t want the double sink. I don’t want the master bedroom. I want the smallest bedrooms you can make and I want a place where we can all gather inside and big porches on both sides,” he recalls her saying when they first sat down to discuss the project.

“One of the most effective ways to make a house feel like it’s part of the landscape is to keep the roof pitches low and bring them down as close to the ground as you can,” says John. “It makes it look like it came up from the land, instead of like it got dropped out of the sky.”

The Waterford property was by no means new to Jean and her husband. When they bought it in the ‘80s, they had five children between the ages of ten and sixteen. They were looking for a summer place where the kids could “range free,” something they were accustomed to doing on the couple of acres around their home in Carlisle, Massachusetts, and the place above the pond—with its collection of primitive camps they dubbed Cooking, Sleeping and Crafts—fit the bill.

“The thing I found most attractive was that they were all old camp buildings and there was nothing you could do to hurt them,” says Jean. “My husband leveled some of the buildings and sanitation needs were met, but beyond that there wasn’t a lot of fussing.”

Then, a little more than a year ago, Jean and one of her now-grown sons, Larry, started brainstorming about building something that would accommodate their expanding family and perhaps provide a few more creature comforts than they had been accustomed to for the past thirty-something years. Jean’s husband, Joe, happily left the project in Jean and Larry’s capable hands. Jean researched architects in southern Maine and landed on John Cole Architect. Something about him felt like he was “the right fit.” She recalls that when she and Larry met John at the property to determine where exactly to

build, she and Larry had their ideas, but John nailed it.

“He put it in the right place.”

When it came to design, John proposed a Japanese temple style with combination hip and gable roof that stretches across the property like a cat. An open farmer’s porch surrounds the main entrance on the uphill side of the camp and a large, screened-in porch flanks the pond-facing side.

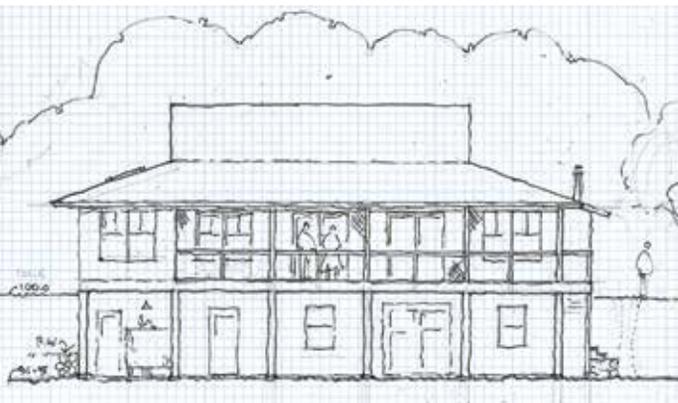
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The hip and gable roof also allows for cozier, more intimate spaces on either end of the house. On one end there’s a Jøtul wood stove set on a slate hearth in a recessed space lined with stone tiles. John envisioned windows on either side of the wood stove and Jean didn’t.

“I won on that one,” she says.

But she’s quick to point out that it was very much a collaborative effort. She refers to it as a three-legged stool in which it all came together because the owner, builder and designer respected one another and worked together for the good of the project.

Other things Jean was very specific about were square footage (not more than 1400) and that there be three bedrooms, one and a half baths and loft space above the kitchen. One thing she was sure she didn’t want was closets in the bedrooms. Stays are rarely more than a few days at a time and Jean knows her kids; she maintains that if they have closets to put stuff into, they’re likely to leave that stuff in there.





“Another one of my rules is you can bring anything with you, but if you don’t take it with you, it becomes common property,” says Jean.

Not having closets also kept the relatively small footprint of the bedrooms (10’x14’) from becoming even smaller. Above each bedroom door is a ventilating transom that contributes to the low-tech cooling system John devised with a combination of awning windows in the gable ends, overhead fans, and the transoms. Even though it’s a hot, high-humidity day in July when we visit, it’s cool and dry inside.

There’s nothing flashy about the camp, but the details give it a quiet quality that emphasizes its connection with the land. On John’s suggestion, the Donnellys hired Damon Builders, Inc., custom home builders based in Mechanic Falls. After launching a construction company in 1984 that grew very quickly and successfully, brothers Jared and Jon Damon made the pivotal decision in the mid-’90s to scale back by committing to work on only one project at a time, as a team that includes owner, architect, carpenters and subcontractors. It was the right decision for them because it allowed them to bring an even higher level of craftsmanship to their work and give homeowners the attention they deserve.

Even though the Donnellys were hundreds of miles away throughout most of the construction, which began last summer and finished at the end of May, they received daily updates from lead carpenter Randy Thurston and finish carpenter Joel Carlton that gave them the confidence the project was progressing as they envisioned it.

Because budget and functionality were key concerns for Jean, it was important for the team to come to consensus on what was essential and what was not. There are no complicated mechanicals in the house because Jean wanted it to be easy to shut down in November and open back up in early May. The Jøtul stove model they chose, a Greenville, comfortably heats the 1400 square feet of space in colder months and electric baseboard heaters in the bedrooms and bathrooms provide a supplemental heat source to take the edge off chilly mornings.

The money they didn’t spend on an expensive, high-maintenance heating and cooling system was instead allocated for blown-in dense pack cellulose in the walls and spray foam insulation in the roof. In combination with John’s design for cross ventilation, the house stays cool on hot days and holds the heat on colder days.



The connection to the outdoors is evident throughout. Two sets of sliding glass doors in the kitchen/living area allow views to the pond as well as access to the screened-in porch that overlooks it. On the porch itself, which is more like an exterior great room, the lower half of the screens are reinforced with welded wire mesh to provide safety without obstructing the view. The farmer's porch on the other side of the camp is a great spot to sit and watch kids and grandkids play games in the front yard. The loft above the stairwell, accessed by a wooden ship's ladder that can be moved flush to the wall when not in use, provides a treehouse-like sleeping space for the grandchildren. On the basement level, a garage door on the lake-facing side opens into a large storage space for canoes and kayaks. Plumbing has been installed for a future outdoor shower station below the stairs.

Because there is regular traffic flow between the pond and the camp, Jean also wanted to build in features that would make it easy to keep things clean. Another one of her rules (let's face it, with five kids you pretty much have to have them) is to leave the camp at least as nice as you found it. Plastic laminate countertops (trade name Formica®) and hardwood floors make clean up quick and easy. Keeping the floor plan unclut-

tered and the color palette uncomplicated also helps that effort. The one pop of color in an otherwise neutral palette of wood, stone and off-white walls is provided by the custom kitchen cabinets that Joel built. John insisted they should be cranberry red and he won on this one. Jean recalls saying to him in the end, "You know, John, you had the endurance and you finally convinced me."

It's a testament to Jean's three-legged stool theory, in which you have an owner who knows what she wants, an architect who takes that information and builds it into the land, and a builder who translates it into the structure.

Asked what she likes best about the outcome of her camp on the pond in Maine, she pauses for a moment on the other end of the line before answering. I imagine she's making a mental scan of the camp to decide which architectural or structural detail gives her the most pleasure, so I'm not quite prepared when she answers.

"I think what I like best is the feeling that I get when I sit on the porch. There you are, up in the trees. I can sit there with my beer or lemonade or coffee and see the glimmer of the lake below. It's everything my life isn't here. It's quiet."

The way life should be . . . at least once in a while. ⚙️