

# A Place Between

Daring departures from its traditional form bring this Maine home in sync with modern life

BY CALEB JOHNSON

## BEST NEW HOME

Designed by architect Caleb Johnson of Biddeford, Maine, this house succeeds admirably in balancing traditional expectations and contemporary demands.

It encapsulates an easy-going floor plan within a time-honored form modernized with unexpected curves and discreetly placed openings. It adds up to a new home that challenges cherished architectural assumptions without abandoning its local vernacular.

Fine Homebuilding  
2015  
HOUSES  
AWARD



**G**ranite Point is a chunk of ledge that juts out into the North Atlantic just south of Biddeford Pool, a community that was once the site of Maine's first recorded permanent settlement and that is now shared by vacationers, lobstermen, and a mix of hearty year-round residents. The geography is purely midcoast Maine, with rough rocks containing the ocean, and waves that roll in and splash high in the air just yards from the houses ringing the point. It's a beautiful and challenging environment in which to build a house.

I met my client, Rick, through a mutual acquaintance, and we hit it off immediately. He had purchased a plot

on the tip of Granite Point and wanted to replace the old Cape there with a new but still outwardly traditional-looking home. An experienced businessman, Rick recognized the natural and regulatory challenges in coastal construction and saw in our firm an ability to address them without sacrificing the art of building in the process.

From the air, the point appears as an oval outcropping tethered to the shore by a sandy strip of land. The site on which we built Rick's house sits at the north side of the point, with Horseshoe Cove wrapping the property to the northwest and the Atlantic only a hundred yards to the east. With the waters of New Barn Cove surround-

ing the point to the south, the house is utterly influenced by water.

### Rewriting tradition

Rick wanted to capture the essence of a Maine-coast cottage without being overly tied to the constraints of a traditional design. He wanted the house to be all about the view, and he wanted it to be respectful of the neighborhood. A distinct front entry was also a priority.

After a few design schemes, we settled on a traditional New England cross-gable form. This met our goals by defining a clear axis through the building that allowed those walking in the front door to enter the living room

immediately and take in the beautiful ocean views visible through the living-room windows.

In addition to the site's panoramic ocean views, the house's floor plan was driven by Rick's desire for informality. The proximity of rooms is based on his family's living habits rather than the expectation of how a house should be laid out. The deck, kitchen, and living room are arranged for an easy flow between them. The kitchen backs up to the living room to allow the owners to be together during meal preparation, while the less-frequently used dining room separates the first-floor master suite from the more active areas. The stairs, laundry room, half-bath, and master bath and closet

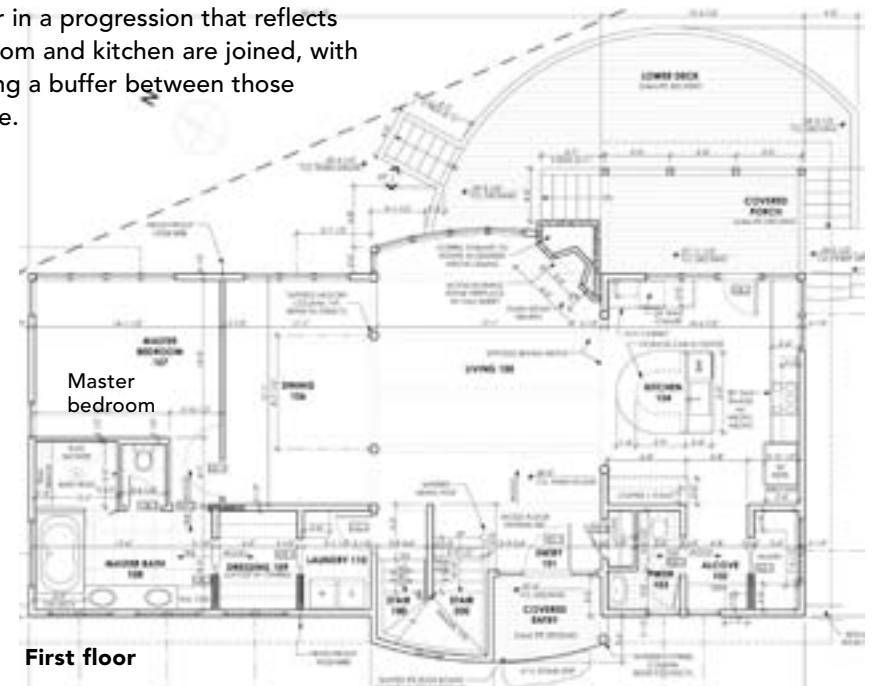
*Anchored to the coast. Perched on a bluff against the Atlantic Ocean, our best new home sits partially on a foundation with spread footings; the rest is anchored to the granite ledge with steel pins.*



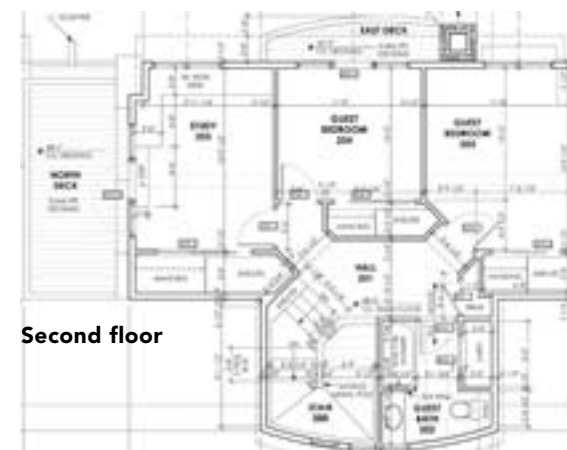
**Breakfast with a view.** Casement windows that turn the corner and sit low on the kitchen countertops serve up a panoramic view to anyone sipping coffee at the kitchen island.

## EAT, LIVE, SLEEP

The rooms of the main floor—kitchen, living room, dining room, and master suite—flow together in a progression that reflects everyday use. The busy living room and kitchen are joined, with the adjacent dining room creating a buffer between those public areas and the master suite.



First floor



Second floor

### SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 3 **Bathrooms:** 2½ **Size:** 2500 sq. ft. **Cost:** \$260 per sq. ft.

**Completed:** 2013 **Location:** Biddeford, Maine

**Architect:** Caleb Johnson Architects & Builders, cjab.me

**Builder:** Douston Construction, Arundel, Maine



**DESIGN VIDEO**  
For an inside look at this home and those behind its design, visit [FineHomebuilding.com/houses](http://FineHomebuilding.com/houses).

were placed on the roadside wall where views were not important. Additional bedrooms and a study are secluded upstairs.

Around the one-and-a-half-story core of the house, we wrapped a lower section for two reasons. First, it allowed us to expand the home's size while staying within volumetric restrictions imposed by the site's proximity to the water. These restrictions allowed no more than a 30% increase in area and volume based on the house that formerly occupied the site. Second, the lower roof on this section helps to ground the building and make it feel more natural in its environment, something I think makes a lot of sense on a coastal site like this.

### Addressing the ocean

With a small lot (approximately 150 ft. wide and 40 ft. deep), setbacks in every direction, and a prohibition against disturbing the natural vegetation, we spent a lot of time working on the siting.

We design houses on sites like this for the ocean side. The floor plan, window placement—everything—is related to the ocean. In this case, the best view required the house to be canted northeast, but going just a bit too far would have resulted in the kitchen windows overlooking the neighboring house. That view in particular was carefully calibrated (see "Wisdom for windows," p. 6) to take in only the view out to sea.

Unable to position a rectangular deck on the ocean side, we drew a curved one on the plans and discovered that by following the arc of the shore, curved decks are a natural for waterfront views. What's more, we found that adding a few more gentle curves in the building—in the front wall and the rear wall of the living room—helped the house sit on the site in a softer way, and feel more comfortable with more space and fewer hard edges. Both curves are gradual enough not to complicate the framing, and the builder, Douston Construction, had no trouble pulling them off. Since then, I've used similar curves

## Wisdom for windows

By virtue of its location, this house is all about the views. We took great care in the selection and placement of windows to maximize those views at every opportunity. Here are some of the strategies we used.

### MUNTINS ARE NOT A MUST

When designing an oceanfront home in New England, the discussion always arises about whether or not to use traditional-looking windows with divided glass. In this house, we incorporated a lot of open glass without muntins. We found that omitting them allowed for unobstructed views and prevented the building from calling more attention to itself than necessary.

### YOU LOOK WHERE YOU SIT

We calculate our window design from the furniture out, which means that we base window placement on where inhabitants of the house are most likely to be. As part of the process, I picture myself in various places in the house, and consider: When I look up, what am I looking at? When I sit down, where does my eye hit the window? One result of questions like these is that we chose casements to avoid having check rails interrupt the view of the ocean.

### EXAMINE WHAT'S OUT THERE

In placing windows, we did so with an eye to the composition they would frame. The kitchen windows, for example, were carefully arranged so that the view would take in both the ocean and the neighbor's lovely, bonsai-like pitch pine just outside the house.

### BUILD WELL, BUT DON'T SACRIFICE THE VIEW

Having so much glass on the north side of a northern-climate house undoubtedly raises concerns about energy efficiency. Our houses are designed with airtight building envelopes and score extremely well on blower-door tests. But when there is a spectacular north-facing view, as there is from this house, I'm not going to tell my clients to restrict glass on that side of the house. - C.J.

**Wake up and see.** In the master bedroom (top), ocean-facing windows are positioned so that the view can be enjoyed even when lying in bed. In the adjoining bathroom (right), windows on the wall facing the road are raised for privacy, while windows over the tub offer a full view of the cove.



in other projects and have become much less wary of them.

### Crafted by man and nature

In addition to the curves, the experience of the house is enriched by allowing some of its structure to remain visible, in particular, the white-oak columns and glulam beams that support the living-room ceiling. Leaving the structure of a building exposed allows us to use that structure as decoration rather than relying on applied moldings or other decoration to create visual interest with. Beyond the practicality of not having to add to a design, I, like many architects, believe that design is ultimately the act of chasing down some version of truth. Exposing a structure down to its framing keeps me and our designers from fibbing about the building. It forces us to grapple with the details of how things are built rather than assuming we can cover it all up with superficial finishes that rob a building of its innate beauty. There's some practicality present as well, of course. The white-oak columns, which were turned by Steve Hanson of Cape Porpoise, Maine, are not only beautiful in their simplicity and craftsmanship, but they help define the spaces, as does the tongue-and-groove white oak that distinguishes the ceilings of the kitchen and dining room.

Outside the house, we exposed the eave to give the low roofs some interesting details, using cypress trim and

cedar shingles to take the brunt of the oceanfront weather. I typically use eastern white cedar for exterior trim because it ages so well on the coast. On this project, we upgraded to cypress, which has wonderful rot resistance and fewer knots. It's a great wood to use for high-end trim.

In all my projects, I use materials that will be improved with time and wear, such as stone, wood, and copper. I tell my clients to think of a hike in the woods and the beauty that is found in lichen-covered rocks and old weathered trees. The same can be applied to a building if the expectation of weathering is integral to the building's design. Unlike manufactured materials, which look best the day they are installed and depend on constant maintenance to remain that way, natural materials such as cypress, cedar, stone, and galvanized steel can be left to take on a patina that shows the age of the building in a graceful way.

One of my architectural heroes, Louis Kahn, was famous for having said, "What does this brick want to be?" I cannot say it any better than that. In this house, as in all my houses, I wanted to find a comfortable and natural resting place for the materials we build with in a way that suits their characteristics best. It's a house that is comfortable on its rocks and welcome to anyone. □

Caleb Johnson is an architect based in Biddeford, Maine. Photos by Trent Bell, except where noted.

**Banking on the view.** Taking advantage of the ocean views to the northeast required a conscious decision to accept the energy penalty the multiple windows would incur.