



Zen and the Art of the Minimal

A California couple
with Maine roots
creates a waterside retreat

REMARKABLE

by Candace Karu
Photography Trent Bell

“**T**he dreams which accompany all human actions should be nurtured by the places in which people live.” The noted architect, Charles Moore, used these words to describe Sea Ranch, a resort community he designed in 1965 on the Northern California coastline. This quote and Moore’s design for the Sea Ranch buildings, pitch-roofed and redwood-clad, were a source of inspiration for a California couple when they purchased a small lot on a pond near Sebago Lake. The two live and work in

San Francisco. With a thriving business and a large, traditional house filled with English antiques, their lives on the west coast are busy and full. They wanted to build a vacation home that would encourage a simpler, less-complicated way of life.

The wife, who had summered in the Sebago Lake area as a teenager, brought her husband, a California native, to visit for the first time in 2001. Like his wife, he fell in love with the setting and the pace of life. In 2002, a family friend notified them of a waterfront property coming on the market. With its exquisite water views, it was the quintessential Maine camp. Located on the lot was a tiny seasonal cottage, hard-used by



Perched on a small rise above the water's edge, the home blends seamlessly into its surroundings. Cedar siding and pine trim echo the colors of the evergreens flanking the cottage. The screened porch recalls the elegance of a Japanese teahouse.

generations of vacationers, that had fallen into a state of decided disrepair. They knew the ramshackle cottage would ultimately have to be replaced. Still, the property, studded with towering pines and tucked out of sight on the edge of a quiet pond, offered the couple a unique opportunity to apply Moore's philosophy to their own lives. Their dream, in keeping with Moore's words, was to build a retreat of quiet simplicity, a place that represented their personal evolution toward the contemplative and the spiritual.

The couple used the cottage for a few seasons while they researched architects and builders. An extensive search eventually led them to Stephen Blatt and David Mattero of Stephen Blatt

Architects in Portland. "We clicked immediately. I had found someone I knew we could trust," says the homeowner of their first meeting. During that initial conversation, they discovered that Blatt had been a protégé of Charles Moore while studying at the Yale School of Architecture. Sea Ranch, it turned out, was a point of artistic connection and common inspiration. Independent of one another, architect and homeowners had envisioned adapting Moore's design sensibility from Sea Ranch to suit a colder climate.

They agreed that this would be a house free of clutter, inside and out, a house "primitive in its simplicity," according to Blatt.



"I asked them if they were interested in simply building a cottage by the lake or if they wanted to push the edge," recalls Blatt of the initial meeting. It soon became clear that the conventional would not be an option for this project.

The site offered design challenges from the first day. "The lot is small and somewhat narrow," recalls David Mattero, the project architect. "We had everything to deal with, from a new septic system to cutting down trees." Zoning restrictions dictated that the size of the new house could exceed the original 700-square-foot cottage by no more than 30 percent. The restrictions weren't a problem for the homeowners who had already adopted a "less is more" attitude toward the project. "As we get older, all the stuff doesn't seem as important. When we're here, our focus is about quiet time."

Early in the planning stages, Blatt and Mattero introduced the homeowners to general contractor Peter Warren of the Warren Construction Group. The builder shared the architects' enthusiasm for the site and the unadorned beauty of the proposed structure, though not without some trepidation. "While the house appears to be very simple," Warren explains, "sometimes

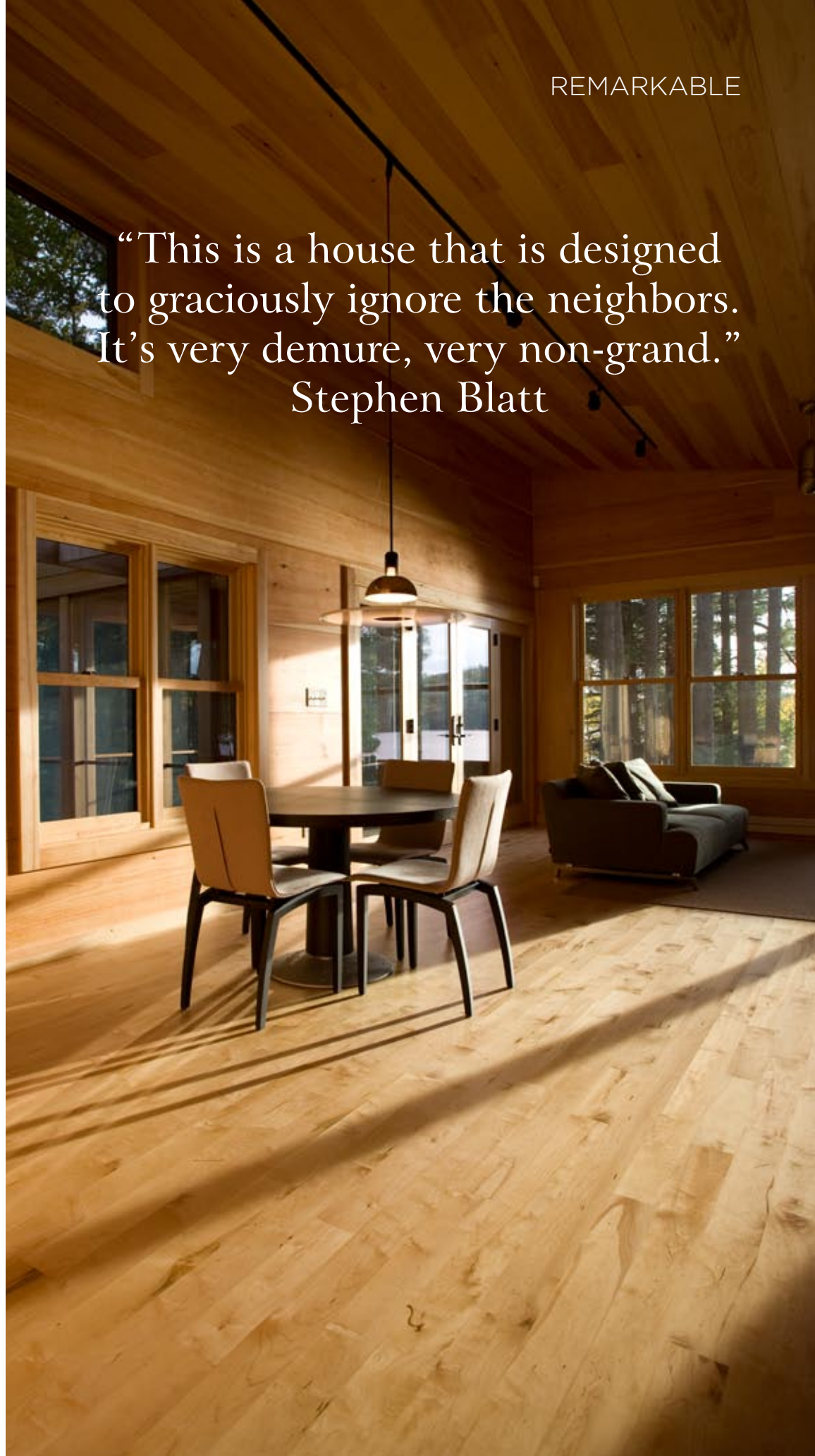


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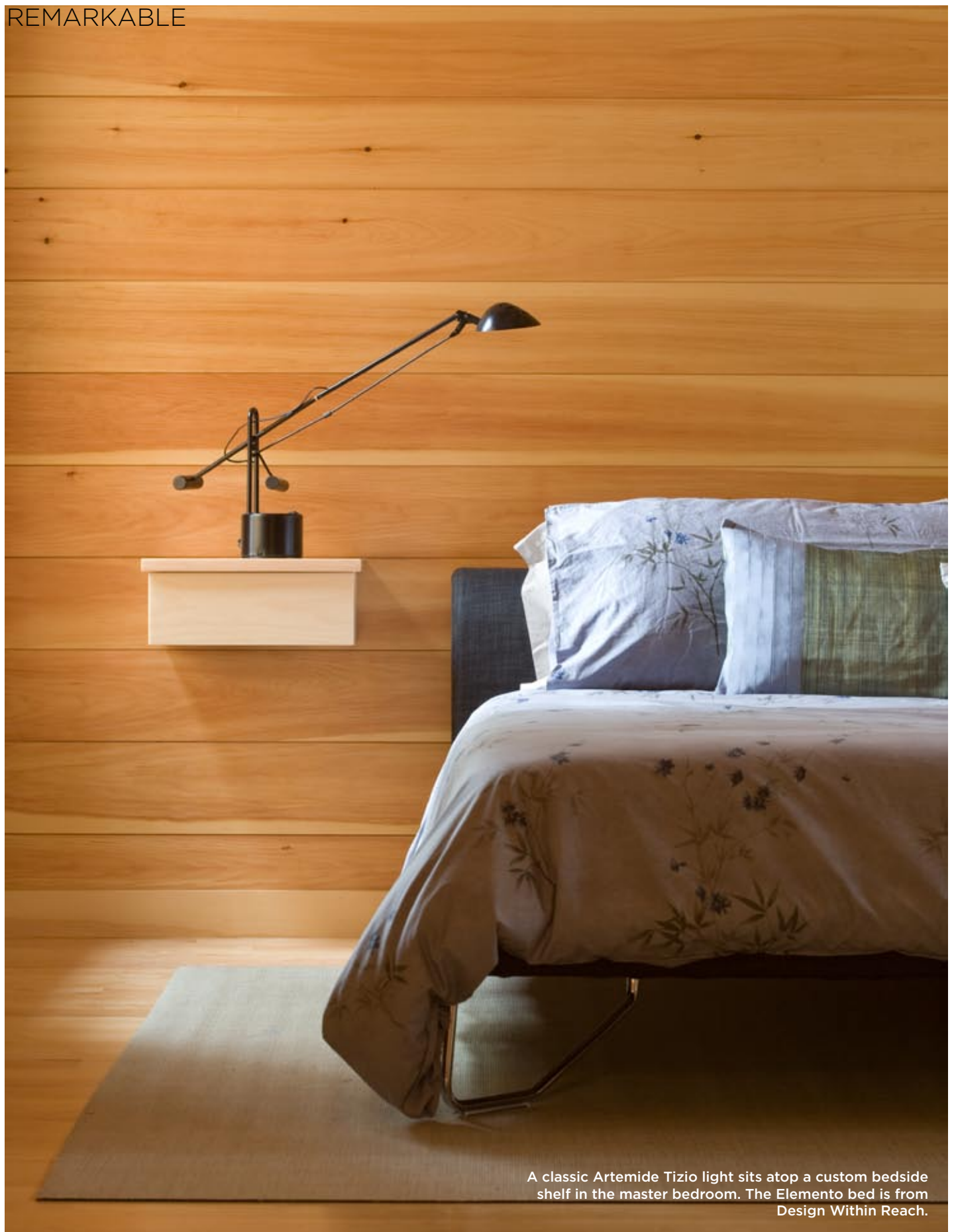
“This is a house that is designed to graciously ignore the neighbors. It’s very demure, very non-grand.”
Stephen Blatt

Inside and out, the colors of nature saturate the environment (opposite top). The mossy green of the Ligne Roset sofa, anchored by a sisal rug, matches the lichen-bedecked tree trunks just beyond the great room windows. Both the Rais woodstove and the Tim Cichocki ceramic ash pot are decorative as well as functional; their graceful proportions belie a utilitarian nature. The homeowners chose matte-black for the appliances and the dining table and neutral granite countertops to ground the kitchen area (opposite bottom). The frosted glass greenhouse window above the sink provides light, privacy, and space for an herb garden.

Volume added by the cathedral ceiling, over 12 feet at its highest point, enhances the modest proportions of the great room (right). Clerestory windows flood the room with additional light and lend it an airy openness. Late afternoon sunlight creates geometric patterns on the golden pine walls and floors.



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A classic Artemide Tizio light sits atop a custom bedside shelf in the master bedroom. The Elemento bed is from Design Within Reach.

simple can be the most difficult to execute. When something is very simple, the details must be perfect. There's really no place to hide." To Warren, the minimalist aesthetics of the house are reminiscent of Japanese architectural styles.

In addition to his established relationship with the architects, Warren also developed a warm and productive working relationship with the homeowners, who were in California during most of the construction. "Steve and David are great at getting their vision across, but in this case the homeowners were wonderful too. They are very visual people, so it was easy to explain what we were doing with pictures and emails," says Warren. He compares this three-way relationship to his favorite piece of furniture: a three-legged stool. "If you have a floor that isn't perfectly even, a three-legged stool will never tip. With four legs there will always be a wobble, but three legs make it completely stable. That's how we worked on this project."

One of the most challenging issues created by the lot was the proximity of structures on either side. As Blatt describes it: "This is a house that is designed to graciously ignore the neighbors. It's very demure, very non-grand." It is also a house that reveals its charms slowly; the impact is cumulative rather than immediate.

The entry is not visible from the road or even from the driveway. One approaches the front door by walkway that is flanked by the guesthouse and the main house. The walk is defined by pale gray granite pavers and topped by a pergola. The geometry and balance of the entryway acts as a graceful transition from exterior to interior and connects the separate buildings.

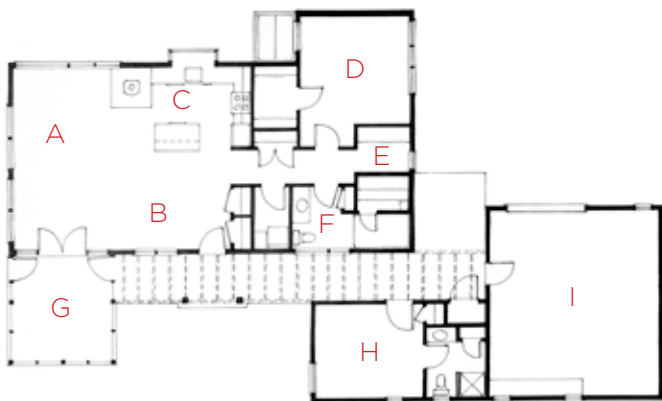
Upon entering the house, the harmony achieved by the juxtaposition of the interior space and the expansive exterior views is striking. The clear pine paneling, flooring, and trim throughout the house gives the abundant natural interior light a golden luminosity. "I wasn't sure about the idea of using pine inside. It made me think of a 1950s kitchen, but I love living



The variegated beige and green tile in the open shower bring the colors that surround the cottage inside (top).

The homeowners cite the shower and the attached dry sauna as two of their favorite features. The guest area is separate from the main house (bottom). The two buildings are connected by a handcrafted pergola that Peter Warren created without using any nails or fasteners. "It was the right thing to do," he emphasizes. "Any fasteners would have shown and ruined the effect."

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- A Living Room
- B Dining Room
- C Kitchen
- D Master Bedroom
- E Office
- F Master Bath
- G Screened Room
- H Guest Room
- I Garage



Night falls and the cottage reveals a more enigmatic beauty. The pergola, which spans the length of the two structures and extends beyond the porch, punctuates the scene. The western red-cedar shingles will turn to a weathered gray in the years to come, eventually mirroring the tones of the surrounding granite.

with this,” says the homeowner of the choice to use pine finishes throughout. The panels in the great room are an extraordinary 22 inches wide and come from Peter Warren’s private stock.

It was important to Warren and the homeowners that renewable, energy-efficient, and local materials were used wherever possible, a practice that Warren has maintained since he started his business. “We’re not doing this to be trendy,” he states emphatically. “It’s just smarter working green. It makes sense, especially in a project like this one, to use things like cellulose insulation and recycled materials.” While some of the materials were fairly humble in origin, others were less so. To create an unfettered view of the water, stainless-steel mesh was

used in the screened porch, which serves as a summer living room. At almost three times the price of standard screening this was a significant upgrade, but it only takes a few minutes on the porch to recognize that it was worth the additional cost. The wood stove in the living room is by Rais, a Danish company, and functions not only as a heat source but also as a sculptural balance and focus for the room.

The homeowners are looking forward to their second season in the house. “We love the fact that the architect and builder gave us what we wanted in a simple-looking structural form – focus on the pond, simplicity in use, a modicum of privacy, and modest maintenance for two aging boomers.” **MH+D**