



Raven Beach

Home reflects life's journey for designer Milford Cushman, potter Terri Gregory

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A FIRE REMOVES THE CHILL OF A COOL SUMMER evening. “When we built the house all of the walls and the ceiling were covered with sheetrock,” says Milford. “After several restorations, we installed painted beaded paneling on the ceiling for more of a beach house or cottage expression.” The width of the living room is 16 feet plus 3 feet for the bay, which is a gable facing due south. The length, including the dining area, is 33 feet. Beyond the living room on the right is the library and study. The cabinets flanking the fireplace were made by Don McCormick from espresso-stained ash. Inset: The fireplace mantel is made of black limestone from Isle la Motte. Terri made the footed vessel, and the painting is by Stowe-area artist Don Hanson.

The personal statements of artists fascinate us. We take delight in seeing what the fashion designer wears when stepping out to the party of the season and what music a composer listens to for pleasure. We are looking for clues to their inner lives and to what inspires them. So what better way to study a man who designs homes for others than by looking at the place he chooses to call home?

Stowe house and project designer Milford Cushman, the principal of Cushman Design Group, is both talented and prolific. His current buildings projects include the National Outdoor Leadership School campus in Palmer, Alaska, a timber-frame barn in New York, a half-dozen new homes in Stowe, Alaska, and several in the Shelburne area, as well as 18 renovation/restoration projects in and around the area. The firm embraces both huge projects—a massive development in the Bahamas is currently underway—and small ones, as small as designing a theater set for a Stowe Theatre Guild production.

At first glance, Cushman’s own Hyde Park home might fool you. He has remained in this starter home—built with his own hands upon coming to Vermont in the 1980s—long past his own expectations. He found a tract of land he loved in a grove of red and Scotch pines next to the property of his then-business associate Greg Paus, and built a small home. He called it Raven Beach for the ancient ocean sands deposited when the area was part of an inland sea, and for the birds soaring overhead, which he now sheepishly admits are mostly crows.

While the homes Cushman now designs are ample at best, his own started as a 900-square-foot, all-wood cabin sited on a gentle rise and carefully tucked under tall trees. Saving the pines and protecting their roots has been a priority. When wife Terri Gregory, an accomplished potter, came into his life, outbuildings were added and the house grew gradually in all directions; it is now per-



MULTI-LEVEL DECKS CONFORM to the south-sloping contours of the site. Red pines, planted in 1947, grow along the edge of a small meadow. *Thuja occidentalis*, some of which are 84-inches tall and wide, surround the lower-level deck to create a sense of enclosure. An architectural pond thrives with arrow arum, water lilies and shubunkins (a pond fish). “The pond reminds us of the great wetlands that we have paddled through in Ontario and Maine.” Inset: The primary entranceway to the house follows wide stone steps employing boulders salvaged from farm fields. The pergola, covered by Virginia creeper and clematis, acts as an entry gateway.

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Inside, the house is long and thin, only one or two rooms wide, with light pouring in from all sides. A joined living and dining room is the heart and social center of the home. It is open to the kitchen and a long, handsome Italian pine harvest table serves as gathering spot for conversation and meals. An Elm woodstove, the main heat source in winter, sits along the dining area wall. The far end of the room features comfortable chairs, ringing a fireplace faced with fossilized black limestone from Isle la Motte in Lake Champlain. Intriguing artwork in a variety of styles is placed throughout the home. When built in the 1980s, sheetrock covered all of the walls and ceilings, but beaded pine ceilings now give the home a more cottage-like sensibility.

On the south side of the house, entirely visible through walls of glass, is a free-form, multi-level deck. Huge flower pots and raised flower beds twine the human and natural space, and inviting nooks under shade trees beg one to stretch out with a book. The ambivalent conundrum of Cushman’s life is his love of trees and the forest, and also of the water. A coi pond is his Vermont “water fix” and he thinks of the ground-hugging decks as wharves. He calls the mix his and Terri’s dance of yin and yang, water and forest. Terri, who grew up on a farm and loved its expansive views, has grown to love the intimacy of what they have created, and is an ardent gardener. The landscaping is designed for all seasons, with welcoming

shades of green during winter months and a riot of color in summer.

Perhaps the most valued room in the house is the summer bedroom. With only screens on three sides between Terri and Milford and the outdoors, they sleep with the breeze on their faces and a clear connection with what is going on in the world beyond. They move into it in May and back indoors to the winter bedroom reluctantly in November. Cushman finds that many clients are moved by the concept and many want to incorporate it in their home design.

In his professional relationship with clients, Cushman is motivated by the psychology of space. Trained originally as an educator, he has always been fascinated with architecture, the history of development, and how buildings relate to the earth. The projects he likes best are with clients who have “a clear vision of where they are in their lives—not a vision of a house, but the qualities that are important to them.” He probes with questions: “Why did you choose this site? What about it is important to you? What colors appeal to you? What do you want? What do you need?”

He treasures the intimacy that results as he works to create a design that reflects where his clients are in their own journey. It is, he says, not house as commodity but home as a reflection of the owners and

their relationship to the earth. He suggests it is more of a Buddhist or Zen approach to design. “When people confide their thoughts it is tender and real,” he says. “That is the part of the job that resonates for me.”

Cushman is working with a private developer on a multi-million dollar project for Great Guana Cay in the Exumas. A long-time visitor and now homeowner there, he was initially contacted for a portion of the project, an off-the-grid eco-resort. But his vision was much larger. He is concerned that too many Bahamians are being forced out of traditional farming and fishing ways of life to find jobs as maintenance workers and housekeepers in yet another resort hotel. He wanted a project that would be, in his words, “environmentally kind but also create a community, and a life.”

The government agreed and he is now at work designing a 250-home settlement and three small “green” resorts, all in classic Bahamian architecture. Wetlands will be constructed for sewage and water supplied by a reverse-osmosis plant. Topsoil is being barged in so that families can return to farming, raising goats, and growing vegetables. A five-mile road is being built to connect the communities and resorts.

Cushman finds it an extraordinary opportunity. “It pulls together all the key threads in my life: ocean, agriculture, sustainable jobs, family, community.” While the job may be Cushman’s dream, the Bahamians are exceptionally fortunate to have a master plan guided by Cushman’s sensitivity and holistic communal approach. ■